

## Confronting the Challenges of Blended Graduate Education with a WEC Project<sup>[1]</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article explores how the Department of Graduate Nursing and a writing specialist at a small regional college have worked together to address the challenges of providing graduate-level education in a blended, professional program to a diverse adult population. This cross-disciplinary effort adapted the Writing-Enriched Curriculum (WEC) model to provide opportunities for both faculty and program development.

Within recent years, many universities and colleges have worked to adopt online courses and programs in order to remain solvent and competitive in the current economic and educational climate. In fact, online education has experienced a tremendous growth and appears to be becoming a standardized method of course delivery in institutions of higher learning (Capra, 2011; Lloyd, Byrne, & McCoy, 2012). Online delivery makes education more accessible to students (Capra, 2011) and can increase accessibility for students living in rural areas (Lake & Pushchak, 2007). All of this makes online delivery particularly appealing to regional institutions that are working to attract non-traditional and rural populations of students in light of decreasing traditional student populations and technological innovations in higher education.

The College of St. Scholastica (CSS), a small, regional, comprehensive Catholic Benedictine college located in northeastern Minnesota, is one such college that has worked to adopt online education. In this essay, we examine this adoption and its effects with a focus on the Department of Graduate Nursing (DGN), one department that supports online education at the college. In addition to operating within a regional college context, the DGN maintains a strong commitment to preparing students to deliver care to rural areas as many of its returning adult students reside and work in them. We begin, then, by considering the larger institutional context and outlining the situational factors affecting the DGN and the challenges it encountered while adopting an online curriculum. We then describe the interdisciplinary project that we, the authors, undertook to engage regional and rural adult learners in an online educational environment so that they meet graduate-level and discipline-specific writing expectations. We conclude by evaluating our project, noting successes and challenges, and by offering recommendations for those engaged or seeking to engage in similar projects at institutions like CSS.

CSS, founded in 1912, historically offered only an undergraduate education to traditional students, but, throughout the 2000s, it has pursued extended sites as well as online and graduate education. CSS now has five campuses located throughout the state of Minnesota. The main campus in Duluth is

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located at the tip of Lake Superior in the seven-county Arrowhead region of northeastern Minnesota, and the four extended sites include St. Cloud, St. Paul, Rochester, and Brainerd (The College of St. Scholastica, 2013a). In addition to the traditional undergraduate programs offered in the six schools (Arts and Letters, Business and Technology, Education, Health Sciences, Nursing, and Science), CSS currently offers four undergraduate programs, eight graduate programs, nine certificate programs in an online format, and blended graduate programs on three campuses (Duluth, St. Paul, and St. Cloud) (The College of St. Scholastica, 2013b). These numbers most likely will continue to increase as the college has plans to expand its online and blended program offerings in the professional schools and projects continued enrollment growth in these programs into 2014.

All of these blended and online programs have introduced larger and more diverse populations of non-traditional students to CSS, many of whom are adult learners from rural areas. [Table 1](#) demonstrates enrollments from Fall 2006 - Fall 2012 (Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, n.d.). The "traditional" category includes undergraduate day programs and the Exercise Physiology, Athletic Training, Occupational Therapy Master's Programs and the Doctor of Physical Therapy Program; the "nontraditional" category denotes all other undergraduate and graduate programs across all sites and instructional formats, such as the Doctor of Nursing Practice, Master of Business Management, and the Master of Education (Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, n.d.).

**Table 1. College Enrollments**

| <b>Enrollment Area</b>        | <b>Fall 2006</b> | <b>Fall 2012</b> | <b>Net Change</b> |
|-------------------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Total CSS                     | 3309             | 4114             | +805              |
| Traditional Undergraduate     | 2138             | 2088             | -50               |
| Traditional Graduate          | 567              | 230              | -337              |
| Non-Traditional Undergraduate | 515              | 789              | +274              |
| Non-Traditional Graduate      | 89               | 1037             | +948              |

From Fall 2006 - Fall 2012, the traditional undergraduate and graduate populations decreased by 387 students (14%), while the non-traditional undergraduate and graduate populations increased by 1,222 students (202%). In Spring 2013, the college reported a slight decline in both traditional and non-traditional student populations, with a traditional student population of 2,178 and a non-traditional population of 1,734 for a total student population of 3,912 students (The College of St. Scholastica, 2013c).

The shift toward online and blended programs coupled with the introduction of larger and more diverse student populations to the college has not been without its challenges. The online and blended programs have introduced many faculty to online educational technologies and learning environments. While some faculty have experience with online education, most faculty primarily have taught in face-to-face settings. As a result, many faculty needed to learn how to operate online educational technologies and engage students in online environments, often with limited institutional support (such as training or assistance from support personnel). In addition to facing a learning curve with online education, faculty now also encounter a larger and more diverse student

body. With greater numbers of students come greater numbers of students who are not well prepared for the expectations and rigor of higher education or who have diverse needs (such as language barriers), limited study skills, and a lack of writing experience. Additionally, students returning to higher education after several years in the workplace often struggle to readjust to the demands of graduate programs and online course delivery. Faculty find they need to acclimate students at both the undergraduate- and graduate-level to the online educational environment, academic expectations, and writing expectations as well as teach content knowledge.

These challenges are what prompted the Department of Graduate Nursing (DGN) to participate in an interdisciplinary project based on the Writing-Enriched Curriculum (WEC) model. The WEC approach seeks to more purposefully and consciously integrate writing into a department's or program's curriculum by having faculty articulate discipline-specific writing conventions and expectations, evaluate existing curriculum for its inclusion and use of writing, and then develop a plan for integrating writing throughout the curriculum.

## The Department of Graduate Nursing

In response to the growing need for primary care services and the advanced practice nursing professional organizations' call for an increase in doctorally-prepared advanced practice nurses, CSS began a Post-Master's Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program in 2006 and a Bachelor of Science (BS) to DNP program in 2008. Two options currently exist for doctoral programs in nursing, the Doctor of Philosophy degree (PhD) and the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree. While the PhD is research-focused, the DNP focuses on advanced clinical practice. The practice-focused doctorates prepare nurses for careers as experts in clinical practice, but they also require a final clinical practice focused project that is designed to serve as a foundation for future scholarly work (AACN, 2006). Both degrees, then, are rigorous with high academic expectations (AACN, 2006). The DNP requires advanced academic work and holds writing expectations similar to the PhD.

Since 2010, CSS has successfully increased enrollment in its non-traditional graduate programs, the Graduate Nursing program, and within that, the BS to DNP program, which has more than doubled in size (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Enrollment Increases**

| <b>Enrollment Area</b>   | <b>2010-11</b> | <b>2011-12</b> | <b>2012-13</b> |
|--------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Total CSS                | 3898           | 4014           | 4144           |
| Non-Traditional Graduate | 857            | 937            | 1037           |
| Graduate Nursing         | 170            | 187            | 188            |
| BS to DNP Program        | 21             | 32             | 52             |

The currently enrolled 188 Graduate Nursing students are adult learners who are returning to school after working as professional nurses for a number of years. Most students attend school on a part-time basis as they need to maintain part- or full-time employment as registered nurses, but in any given year, a small number of Graduate Nursing students attend the program on a full-time basis. Those full-time students are expected to work no more than 0.6 full-time equivalents due to the fast-

paced nature of the program; full-time students are expected to complete the program in three years while part-time students are expected to complete it in four.

CSS is the only college in northern Minnesota offering baccalaureate, master's, and DNP degree programs in nursing. Additionally, since there are no institutions offering Graduate Nursing programs in northern Wisconsin or Michigan's Upper Peninsula, CSS typically enrolls nursing students from these rural regions as well. There is a strong need for well-prepared DNPs in remote regions of Minnesota. DNPs have the broad-based knowledge to effectively address the needs of the rural populations, which are characterized by isolation, poverty, and large numbers of elderly and minority residents. The Arrowhead region (2008 population: 320,342) has a population density of only 17.6 people per square mile compared to 65.6 in Minnesota overall (U. S. Department of Commerce United States Census Bureau, 2010). Of the seven Arrowhead counties, six are either entirely or partially designated as Medically Underserved Areas and/or Medically Underserved Populations (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2013); these same six counties are also entirely or partially designated as Primary Care Health Professional Shortage Areas (Minnesota Department of Health, 2011). These areas are often characterized by fewer primary care providers and/or populations with decreased access to health care services. As a result, areas with designations such as these are eligible for additional state or federal funding to assist in meeting the needs of their populations. DNP providers are in a prime position to help meet the needs of these populations, and the majority of students enrolled in the DNP programs at CSS work and reside in rural areas and intend to remain in those locations after graduation to provide primary care services.

Since the Graduate Nursing programs attract returning adult learners from rural areas and surrounding states, they are delivered in a blended format, consisting of a mix of online and face-to-face courses. Face-to-face courses are offered to Graduate Nursing students on the main Duluth campus and the St. Cloud extended site. Both sites draw students from rural areas throughout the state. Students in the DNP program take twenty-one core courses (fifteen of which are taught exclusively by Graduate Nursing faculty and the remainder are taught both by faculty inside and outside of the department), most of which are taken during the first two years in the program and are only delivered in an online format. Toward the end of their programs, students transition to specialty clinical courses, which are delivered in a hybrid format (blend of online and face-to-face learning). Once students begin clinical courses, the mix of online and face-to-face learning provides them the opportunity to hone their advanced practice nursing skills not only in the clinical setting but also the classroom environment.

Given the hybrid nature of the programs, the eight full-time and one part-time faculty in the DGN who were used to teaching primarily in a face-to-face mode have needed to learn new skills and technology. The faculty are eager learners, but they found that it was time intensive and intimidating to learn a new way of teaching with limited institutional support. While technology was available, training in the use of the technology was limited. Without the necessary training, the knowledge and skills needed to develop and deliver an online course were lacking. All of this prompted the DGN to seek assistance.

One of the primary strategies used at CSS during the expansion of online education was to investigate and subscribe to a quality measure for online course development. The goal was to increase the quality of online courses. In April 2011, a team of faculty and staff familiar with online education reviewed and selected a tool to use as a quality improvement measure for online courses. Three different tools were reviewed, but one tool was immediately eliminated as the tool was tied to a specific learning management system. The CSS team then did a cross-reference of each item on the remaining two tools to see which would best evaluate the quality of online courses at CSS. Quality Matters (QM) was chosen because of its ease of use, research backing, acceptance by the industry,

and the possibility that QM could perform an external review of a course at some time in the future (N. Schutte, personal communication, March 4, 2013).

QM is an organization with subscribers located worldwide, including the United States. According to the QM website (Quality Matters, 2010a), 43 higher education institutions across the state of Minnesota are subscribers to QM; of those 43 institutions, over half (25) are technical and/or community colleges. The mission of QM is:

To promote and improve the quality of online education and student learning through:

1. Development of research-supported, best practice-based quality standards and appropriate evaluation tools and procedures.
2. Recognition as experts in online education quality assurance and evaluation.
3. Fostering institutional acceptance and integration of QM standards and processes into organizational improvement efforts focused on improving the quality of online education.
4. Provision of faculty development training in the use of QM rubric(s) and other quality practices to improve the quality of online/hybrid courses.
5. Provision of quality assurance through the recognition of quality in online education. (Quality Matters, 2010b)

More specifically, the premise of QM is to employ a continuous quality improvement process through the use of a rubric and process for course design with the underlying principles of continuity; rubrics and processes centering on research, student learning, and quality; collegiality; and collaboration (Quality Matter, 2010c). The QM rubrics and processes are not meant to be prescriptive but suggest flexibility because there are several ways to meet each standard (Quality Matters, 2010c). QM also emphasizes the concept of alignment as a unique component to the evaluation framework. Alignment occurs when the "critical course components" (learning objectives, assessment and measurement, instructional materials, learner interactions and engagement, and course technology) work in concert with to ensure students achieve the identified learning outcomes for the course (Quality Matters, 2010d).

QM identifies eight general standards and 41 more specific accompanying sub-standards, which are used as a basis for the rubric, designed to evaluate online and hybrid courses (Quality Matters, 2010d). Each of the sub-standards has an assigned point value ranging from one to three. The eight standards are: (a) course overview and introduction, (b) learning objectives (competencies), (c) assessment and measures, (d) instructional materials, (e) learner interaction and engagement, (f) course technology, (g) learner support, (h) accessibility (Quality Matters, 2010d).

While the use of QM is not required at CSS, the use of the QM rubric as a framework for course design is strongly encouraged by the online program staff and administration. Some programs have access to instructional designers who work with the faculty (considered subject matter experts) on course design. In these cases, faculty provide the course content to the instructional designers who then add it to the online courses, which are delivered through the Blackboard Education Technology Platform. Graduate Nursing faculty for the most part did not have access to an instructional designer because of the hybrid nature of the program but were encouraged to adopt the QM rubric and were provided with some instructions for developing courses from the online program staff who presented the rubric and the general QM and CSS philosophies to online education; recommendations for online course content, tools, development, and delivery; and course template information during several faculty meetings.

While the QM process and rubric provide a good framework for programs at CSS, especially those that have access to an instructional designer, the flexibility in achieving standards that QM suggests is often not realized since our institution has adopted some practices not necessarily promoted by QM but that work within it. There is a strong desire by different entities at the college to standardize the format and structure of all online courses. In many cases, a "master course" is created that all faculty are encouraged to use. Since many of the online programs use adjunct faculty in lieu of full-time faculty, providing a standardized course format and template makes the course easier for adjuncts to teach as the work of developing and designing courses has been done for them. Additionally, faculty have been encouraged to use short narrated lectures, multiple-choice quizzes, discussion board postings, and rubrics for grading regardless of the course content or student populations. Finally, faculty who work with instructional design staff at the college are required to complete course revisions at least two weeks before the semester prior to implementation. For example, if a course is taught spring semester, the standard plan is to have the course developed in its entirety and posted approximately two weeks prior to the end of fall semester. Even when not working with instructional designers, faculty are encouraged to post courses in their entirety (including all lectures, quizzes, assignments, discussion board posts, etc.) a minimum of two weeks prior to the start of the course so that students can review all course content, activities, and assignments.

Graduate Nursing faculty encountered several problems while attempting to use the QM process and our college's particular adoption of it. As is the nature of graduate-level work, the Graduate Nursing program content is complex; there is a heavy volume of material required for DNP students to read, synthesize, and apply through course assignments and clinical work. While short lectures or multiple-choice quizzes were helpful in delivering and assessing specific content from readings and coursework, students often viewed them more as places to find specific information and then regurgitate it rather than as places to apply course content. Critical thinking, however, is a necessary skill for DNP students and DNP providers who work with complex patients in complex situations. Since critical thinking involves conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2011), the short lectures and quizzes did not constitute an adequate methodology for evaluating whether students were learning the complex material and able to critically think through complex clinical scenarios.

In addition, clear, concise, evidence-based writing is an essential skill for DNPs. DNPs in the clinical setting need to articulate patient problems and clinical work correctly and concisely to other professionals on a daily basis. They also are expected to engage in other professional activities that require writing, including grant writing, conference presentations, and scholarly publications. Again, short lectures and quizzes are not conducive to improving writing abilities since these tools do not prepare the DNP graduates to write in the manner required in academic and clinical settings.

Discussion board postings and rubrics for grading also posed problems, as the Graduate Nursing faculty quickly discovered. QM and our instructional staff encourage student engagement and suggest the use of discussion boards as the primary way to achieve student-to-faculty and student-to-student interaction. However, short discussion board postings were consistently disappointing both in content and writing even when students were provided with a rubric indicating the components required.

Rubrics for grading were also provided to students for papers that they wrote as part of their course work. Many courses within the Graduate Nursing programs require papers as a means to assess student learning and to evaluate the student's ability to synthesize complex content. Each paper assignment used a different rubric, designed by an individual faculty member or, in some cases, by more than one faculty member if the course had multiple sections. Faculty used these rubrics for

grading but were frustrated with the outcomes of student papers. Students appeared to be writing to the rubric, in order of the components, without attention to introductions, transitions and other stylistic considerations, summaries, and conclusions. While some rubrics addressed these concerns, not all of them did. Instead, faculty often assumed students would know to include certain elements in their writing (like an introduction, conclusion, or transitions) without explicit instruction to do so. In general, faculty found that the content of submitted papers was not well developed, American Psychological Association (APA) format and citation practices were not followed well, and grammatical, punctuation, and mechanical errors interfered with meaning and development. Faculty spent hours grading each paper, making comments on the content and correcting error, yet they did not feel that student writing improved over the course of the semester or even over the entire program.

The disconnect between our institution's adoption of QM, the desire to standardize processes for all online learners, and the needs of graduate education, the DGN, and its students became most visible and problematic in student writing. Graduate Nursing faculty were increasingly frustrated because the majority of students did not meet the desired expectations of the faculty in regards to writing, style, and format. Faculty did not feel prepared to work with students who had varying levels and often low levels of preparedness for graduate-level work and writing, nor did they feel prepared or supported to teach at the graduate-level in an online environment. Students were increasingly frustrated with inconsistent messages from faculty about writing since some provided abundant feedback while other faculty provided little. Many students also did not understand the expectations of graduate-level work and writing nor did they feel supported in their efforts to pursue them. Both students and faculty were frustrated by inconsistencies in departmental writing expectations and the grading of writing. All of these frustrations were heightened in an online environment where nearly all student-to-student interactions and student-to-faculty interactions occurred in writing.

## The WEC Project

Faced with large amounts of student writing, faculty were increasingly concerned about the lack of improvement in writing skills across the programs and wanted to address the situation. They recognized that they rarely discussed expectations for writing beyond each individual course and that their expectations and grading practices (particularly in regards to APA style) were inconsistent. They also understood that there was little to no sequencing of assignments between courses or over the entire curriculum. While faculty worked continuously on course sequencing in order for students to move from less to more complex material, less emphasis was placed on the development of assignments within courses and how these assignments fit with past and future courses.

In an attempt to address the increasing frustrations of both faculty and students, we, as the chair of the DGN (Fauchald) and the only composition and rhetoric specialist at the college (Bastian), undertook an interdisciplinary project that sought to more purposefully and consistently incorporate writing across the DGN's curriculum. Our efforts were modeled after the Writing-Enriched Curriculum (WEC) approach out of the University of Minnesota. By combining elements of writing across the curriculum (WAC) and writing in the disciplines (WID), the WEC approach "provides academic departments with a way to ensure that discipline-relevant writing and writing instruction are intentionally infused into their undergraduate curricula" (Center for Writing, n.d.). Departments achieve this infusion by engaging in a three-phase, recursive process in which they create, implement, and assess a writing plan with the assistance of a composition and rhetoric specialist (Center for Writing, 2009). The writing plan serves as the centerpiece of the WEC approach, as it "articulate[s] discipline-specific writing expectations, and plans for curricular integration of writing instruction, writing assessment, and instructional support" (Center for Writing, 2009). Our primary reasons for

adopting this approach were that it is faculty-driven and context-specific. As Anson, Dannels, Flash, and Housley Gaffney (2012) explained:

The WEC model develops from two related convictions. First, those who teach undergraduate students in the disciplines should be the ones to shape the writing instruction and assessment that occur there. Second, curricular infusion of discipline-relevant writing instruction will not be adequately achieved until faculty groups have had a chance to examine, and possibly revise, assumptions about what writing and writing instruction look like and entail.

While we embraced the WEC convictions and adopted its general framework, we adapted some elements to better suit the small regional college context. For example, instead of collecting data from faculty in online surveys, Bastian performed individual interviews with each faculty member since personal communication and interaction are often preferred and even expected at small colleges. We also simply do not have the institutional structures or access to resources that are often present at large research universities. Our writing center, for instance, has limited staff and resources to support graduate level education, so we needed to incorporate writing into the DGN curriculum in ways that could primarily be sustained and implemented by the DGN faculty without putting undue pressure on the writing center.

The project formally spanned over three semesters, Spring 2012, Fall 2012, and Spring 2013, although the productive relationship continues to today. The writing plan was developed over the course of Spring 2012 and received approval by the DGN at the beginning of Fall 2012 (Appendix A). To create the writing plan, data was collected and analyzed to uncover writing expectations of the discipline and faculty as well as areas of concern. Collected data included: sample marked student papers and their corresponding assignments and rubrics; the graduate program handbook; syllabi and writing assignments from all fifteen core courses taught exclusively by the Graduate Nursing faculty; and individual interviews with the Graduate Nursing Faculty performed by Bastian. As part of this data collection process, each faculty member also created her own informal writing outcomes statement for the DGN that outlined what writing skills and tasks graduates should be able to demonstrate upon completion of the DNP program. While the compilation and analysis of this data was primarily performed by Bastian as the outside composition and rhetoric specialist on the project, she shared her findings with Fauchald and the DGN throughout the process to receive feedback.

Departmental meetings also played a central role in the creation of the writing plan. Over the course of the Spring 2012 semester, the DGN and Bastian meet three times. These meetings served an important role as they allowed faculty to share their experiences with writing and their own writing expectations and engage in dialogue, which unveiled some similar writing expectations among DGN faculty but also points of disagreement and inconsistency. This experience is common as others engaged in WEC projects have discovered the same phenomenon (Anson, Dannels, Flash, and Housley Gaffney, 2012; Werry & Lein Walseth, 2011). These meetings also allowed Bastian to raise topics or issues that were identified during the data collection and analysis process and receive feedback from the faculty as a whole. It was during one of these meetings that the faculty revised and approved the final Writing Outcomes Statement for the DGN that Bastian developed based on the interview data and individual informal writing outcome statements. The approved Writing Outcomes Statement clearly articulated six overarching writing outcomes and played a central role in the creation of the writing plan ([Appendix B](#)).

The writing plan was based on the analysis of the collected data, feedback from faculty at departmental meetings, and a comparison of the core courses and their assignments to the newly



created Writing Outcomes Statement. This comparison was depicted in color-coded chart that highlighted how and to what extent the curriculum currently was and was not meeting the writing outcomes. The assignments for all courses were reviewed and marked for the outcomes that they met, and this data was inserted into a spreadsheet. The research outlined major findings and offered five recommendations for the DGN:

1. Participate in a workshop on the marking and grading of student writing;
2. Include direct instruction and support in academic writing in the core courses during the first year of the program;
3. Integrate elements of the writing process and peer review throughout the curriculum;
4. Restructure the use of discussion board posts and explore other electronic media for student interaction in all courses; and
5. Incorporate more opportunities to practice reflective clinical practice throughout the curriculum. ([Appendix A](#))

With DGN faculty approval, the plan was implemented in the Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 semesters. During the Fall 2012 semester, the DGN participated in a two-hour, interactive workshop on assessing writing designed especially for them by Bastian. The workshop was held during a regularly scheduled department meeting, which all faculty are required to attend. The faculty elected to focus their efforts on revising the fifteen core courses taught exclusively by Graduate Nursing faculty in the programs to address recommendations 2, 3, 4, and 5. They chose to address the writing plan's recommendations by revising the core courses for two reasons: they wanted to maintain and reinforce consistent writing expectations and activities throughout the programs, and they generally taught these courses from the same syllabus with the same textbooks and assignments.

To revise all of the core courses during Fall 2012 and Spring 2013, two faculty members, operating as a pair, were assigned to revise one of the core courses and were provided with some guidance for how they could proceed. The pairs met with Bastian once or twice to discuss course revisions. During these meetings, cross-course connections were facilitated and any concerns were discussed. These collaborative pairings marked an important shift in the DGN's course development process. Previously, an individual would develop and teach a course in isolation from others teaching different sections of the same course or, more commonly, one individual would develop a course and other faculty would then teach it from the same syllabus—in fact, most faculty taught courses that they had adopted rather than created. Instead, we sought to make course development more collaborative and to allow for more variation between instructors while still creating syllabi and assignments that all faculty could use.

The result of these collaborative pairings was a transformation of the core course curriculum. While the revisions were too numerous and nuanced to detail here, we want to highlight a few revisions that spanned multiple courses and represent the kind of work the faculty undertook. In one significant revision to the curriculum, faculty created series of scaffolded assignments that helped prepare students to compose lengthy papers rather than simply requiring students to produce 10-20 page papers at the end of the semester with little assistance. For example, in Theories of Human Development, students were previously required to compose a 15-20 page theory paper that was submitted at the end of the semester. As part of the revision, students still compose a 15-20 page theory paper, but now they also compose a proposal, annotated bibliography, and content outline during the term and receive instructor or peer feedback on all documents. Engaging in the writing process and receiving feedback is especially important for students in this program, all of whom are

adult learners returning to higher education and often are balancing the demands of a part- or full-time employment, family, and education. Many have not experienced academic writing and expectations for several years when they enter the program, so the composition of 10-20 page papers without additional assistance or feedback is a challenge and not one that many can meet successfully, as faculty discovered.

Faculty also worked to more explicitly integrate direct instruction on academic and disciplinary writing expectations and conventions into their courses. In *Leadership in Healthcare*, for instance, students now complete an assignment in which they compare and evaluate websites for their credibility and reliability and another assignment in which they analyze a scholarly paper for its use of a thesis statement, evidence, and analysis. In another example, students in *Theorizing Nursing Practice* are told what elements make a good summary and then practice summarizing a concept from a required reading. This kind of explicit and direct instruction allows students who have not been in an academic setting or composing academic prose for many years to see faculty expectations and work to understand them. It also allows them insight into the expectation that a nurse practitioner engage in evidence-based practice. By explicitly analyzing and discussing the quality of sources as well as the kind of evidence that is used in academic articles, students discover what counts as evidence within the field as well as how nurse practitioners use that evidence to inform their practices.

In addition to direct instruction, faculty created group activities so that students could practice new analytical skills and writing tasks with others before completing independent projects. In one example, students in *Epidemiology and Biostatistics* now work together in groups to practice critiquing a study and composing a critique before each student composes his or her own critique of a study. Likewise, students in *Outcomes Research* engage in several group activities in which they practice analyzing and evaluating a common measurement tool (the Beck Depression Inventory) and a research study that uses this tool before each individual selects, analyzes, and evaluates a measurement tool and two research studies that use this tool. Having the opportunity to practice new skills and tasks with others is helpful for all students but is especially useful for the students in this program who have not practiced academic writing expectations in many years and are learning new skills required of nurse practitioners. This also helps to foster collaborative relationships between students in an online environment, which can otherwise be difficult to achieve.

Incorporating writing tasks that engage the writing process (including peer review), provide some direct writing instruction, and require peer collaboration encouraged faculty to explore other Blackboard tools, which, in turn, shifted their reliance away from Discussion Board posts for student engagement and interaction. Blogs and wikis provided a space for students to comment on each other's proposals and drafts for writing assignments. Wikis also provided a space for students to engage in group activities and compose group writing projects. Additionally, faculty developed webinars that directly discussed and engaged writing conventions and expectations as well as specific writing tasks. Faculty also discovered the journal tool that allows students to engage in self-reflection with weekly or bi-weekly journal posts. With a wider range of educational technology tools at work, most faculty elected to eliminate Discussion Board posts entirely.

This project has not just transformed the curriculum—it also transformed the DGN as a whole and the individuals within it. While the department was collegial and remains so, it has become even more collaborative and cooperative. Faculty anecdotally report that they have a better understanding of the department and its goals as well as their own roles within the department. This is, in part, because the faculty and core courses are now consciously and purposefully working together to achieve the writing outcomes that the program hopes to achieve. As one faculty member observed, "we are finally working smarter, not just harder," a sentiment with which many agreed. As is common in WAC and

WID work, a significant conceptual shift occurred within the department that allowed faculty to view writing as not separate from content knowledge but as a way to teach and reinforce content knowledge and also what it means to be a professional in the field (for example, see Bazerman and Russell, 1994; McLeod, Miraglia, Soven, & Thaiss, 2001; Monroe, 2003). This shift particularly resonated with many of the Graduate Nursing faculty because writing is an essential component of their practice. They must clearly articulate in writing an assessment, treatment plan, and results to other healthcare providers and the patient on a daily basis. Admittedly, this shift took approximately a year to occur and is still evolving, but it allowed faculty to incorporate writing into their courses guilt-free.

We certainly are not claiming, however, that this project was a cure-all for all problems or concerns that faculty and students encounter, and we have yet to formally assess our efforts, but we can informally report that the fevered pitch of frustration from both faculty and students has subsided to a low buzz. Faculty have observed that student writing is improving and that they have a higher level of satisfaction and lower levels of frustration with students and their work. Students also have told faculty that they have a higher level of satisfaction with the writing assignments and the level of instruction and that they have a better understanding of both writing expectations and content knowledge. While all of this reporting is self-selected and informal, it suggests that positive changes have occurred within the department.

## Evaluation of the WEC Project

As we reflect on our experiences with the WEC project, we can identify factors that affected the success of the project. In this section, we consider those factors and briefly evaluate our project. Again, since we only recently completed the project, we have not yet had the opportunity to formally assess it. However, our observations and experiences may prove useful to others engaged in similar projects at regional and rural institutions, especially those confronting the challenges of hybrid and online programs at the graduate-level.

One of the primary factors that contributed to the project's successes was the high level of faculty investment. While Fauchald acting as the chair initiated the project, all members of the department took an active interest in the project from the start. This most likely can be contributed to the high level of frustration within the department when the project started. Faculty understood that how they currently were teaching was not working and acknowledged the need to change. They just did not know how or what to change. In many ways, this was the ideal moment to begin a project like this—faculty were already invested in the idea of change without needing much convincing and were willing to try the WEC approach. Having the chair freely elect to participate in the project probably also contributed to the faculty's initial investment. The chair was able to facilitate the consultant attendance at DGN meetings, identify faculty to be involved in specific courses, assist with the pairing of faculty for course assignment work, and participate with the teams in assignment redesign. Additionally, the chair provided anecdotal information and formal reports to the chair of the English Department and Dean of the School of Arts and Letters, who provided reassignment time to the consultant.

We maintained this initial faculty investment and good will over the three semesters of the project. One way was by continuously and consciously responding to the needs of the faculty and the department throughout the project, a central tenet of the WEC approach. To do so, the writing plan and all other activities were crafted based on the analysis of the collected data and faculty feedback, and immediate concerns and questions from the faculty were addressed in a timely manner due to regular faculty meetings. The workshop on assessing writing, for example, was developed especially

for the DGN to address issues that arose during the data analysis and incorporated examples from and activities based on writing from students in the department. Faculty investment in the program also increased as they saw positive effects in their students and their writing over time. As faculty implemented their revisions to the core courses, most anecdotally reported that they witnessed improved student writing over the course of the semester and received positive feedback from students.

The high level of faculty involvement in the project also contributed to its successes. All faculty members participated in-person or via phone in faculty meetings and the Assessing Writing Workshop, contributed to the data collection process, and helped to revise the core course curriculum. To maintain this high level of involvement, faculty played a central role in enacting the writing plan. While the writing plan provided recommendations, they were intentionally crafted to provide flexibility, so the faculty determined how the recommendations would be enacted. The faculty were also responsible for much of the work of the project, primarily the revision of the core course curriculum. Faculty members developed ideas for revising the core courses with Bastian's assistance, but, ultimately, the collaborative pairs made the final decisions and were responsible for revising the assignments and course materials. The collaboration between faculty pairs also contributed to faculty involvement on a larger scale. Once the pairs completed their work, the entire group came together to review the new assignments and staging of writing within and among courses in the curriculum. As a result, all faculty contributed to the course revisions and the overarching curriculum even when they were not directly involved in individual course revisions.

One final factor that contributed to the project's successes was the use of an outside consultant who was a composition and rhetoric specialist. While Bastian crafted the writing plan, developed the Assessing Writing Workshop, and provided some guidance and resources, her role was primarily limited to that of consultant. It was especially important that the consultant served in no supervisory or evaluative capacity. By adopting the roles of observer and consultant, Bastian provided an outside perspective that allowed faculty to see their curricula and practices differently without feeling defensive or attacked. By being a composition and rhetoric specialist, Bastian also was able to provide the expertise and resources that the faculty needed to make productive changes to the programs. Overall, the use of a consultant made this project achievable. Working with the consultant allowed faculty to gain new skills and confidence in developing and evaluating assignments. Without the substantial amount of work performed by the consultant and her overarching perspective, the faculty would still be on step one, attempting to articulate and develop writing outcomes. The consultant kept the faculty moving forward in a timely manner, which resulted in a substantially revised curriculum by the end of the project.

As with any project, along with our successes, we encountered some challenges. While all faculty teach at least one of the core courses, some faculty primarily teach core courses while other faculty primarily teach the specialized clinical courses. For this reason, most of the work of this project fell on the faculty who primarily taught the core courses and some faculty were involved in revising more courses than others. Not only did the pairs need to work together to modify assignments in courses, all the pairs also needed to meet together periodically as a group in order to better sequence assignments between courses. Additionally, they needed to articulate the changes to the faculty members who were less involved in the revision of the core courses at department meetings. All of this resulted in a less than equal division of the work, which did not go unnoticed by faculty members. We recommend, then, that all faculty be involved in enacting the writing plan from the beginning so that everyone is aware of how the writing outcomes are being met and a more equitable division of the work is negotiated early in the process.

All of the work of the project was done not only independently but also in small groups, larger groups, and a group of the faculty as a whole. This group work and scheduling became time intensive for the faculty involved but also for the consultant who had the task of scheduling meetings among the pairs of faculty. Another challenge of this project was the time commitment required from both the faculty and Bastian. As demonstrated above, undertaking a project that seeks to implement widespread changes in the curriculum and affect the culture of the department requires a significant amount of time and effort from all parties involved. Our project spanned over 17 months because faculty needed time to articulate and agree upon discipline-specific writing expectations, make revisions to the curriculum, adapt new teaching practices, and learn new online teaching technologies. They also needed to receive feedback and support throughout the process so that they gained the skills and confidence necessary to make changes. As such, we certainly can confirm Anson, Dannels, Flash, and Housley Gaffney's (2012) observation that enabling faculty to engage in the WEC process "is not fast work." For those wishing to engage in this process at their own institutions, it is our recommendation that an adequate timeframe be mapped out and included in any proposal for release time.

Despite being a time-intensive project, the amount of time the consultant and faculty could dedicate to the project was limited. Higher administration while supportive of the overall concept was less supportive of the reassignment time required for the consultant to adequately work with the department. While Bastian received a single course reassignment to participate in this project, she also needed to use that time to coordinate WAC efforts in other departments and programs. There was no reassignment time available for the DGN faculty, who also need to do a significant amount of work. Werry and Lein Walseth (2011) also noted the challenge of "time-poor core faculty" when they participated in a pilot WEC project in the Department of Theatre Arts and Dance at University of Minnesota (p. 190). As such, it will be important for individuals in similar endeavors to document the time involved in a project such as this and negotiate reassignment time upfront. It is also important for individuals to realize that projects like these will take time even when they secure appropriate reassignment time and articulate this to higher administration in advance.

Now that the word is out about the work of the DGN, other graduate programs at CSS are requesting similar support for their programs. The work accomplished with the DGN occurred at the right time and in the right place—faculty and student frustration was at an all time high, and faculty were willing to try anything to make the situation better for them and for students. It remains to be seen if other departments will have the immensely successful experience that the Graduate Nursing faculty had or if institutional funding for WEC projects with other departments will continue. For many complex reasons, including the decreasing number of high school graduates and the emergence of educational technologies, like MOOCs, in higher education, the college priority during the 2013-2014 academic year is to support new initiatives that generate revenue or can be offset by further cuts (President's Staff, personal communication, February 28, 2013). Although WEC arguably contributes indirectly to revenue generation, the place of WEC as a new initiative that does not display direct revenue generation within the current and future budget cycles remains unknown.

Regardless of the future of WEC at our institution, we believe that our project demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary collaborations between professional program faculty and composition and rhetoric experts. The development of the Graduate Nursing curriculum has not only resulted in more realistic writing expectations for students but also a sequenced approach, which will help students develop their writing skills throughout the programs. Moreover, Graduate Nursing faculty developed a new camaraderie by working in teams as well as a clearer understanding of the role individual course assignments and they themselves play in the development of student writing. Working in collaboration with a composition and rhetoric expert from another discipline resulted in faculty modifying their grading techniques to provide more consistent and meaningful feedback to students.

While professional program faculty benefit from such collaborations so too do the composition and rhetoric experts who work with them. Working with the Graduate Nursing faculty exposed Bastian to new and different disciplinary knowledge and writing expectations as well as provided her with experience in negotiating individual, department, college, and administrative dynamics. This kind of knowledge and work only will serve to strengthen future projects and interactions with other faculty across the disciplines. To say that both the Graduate Nursing faculty and Bastian have grown immensely from this collaboration is not an overstatement.

What we hope to have demonstrated in this essay is that online education is a reality we must face, and at regional, rural, and branch institutions, it is a reality that we often must face with limited resources and institutional support structures. The growing enrollments of non-traditional students in online and blended programs at CSS and the resulting challenges that the DGN encountered are not unique in higher education today. Current trends indicate that online course delivery in institutions of higher learning will continue to expand. Predictions also indicate that non-traditional student populations will continue to increase, especially those in underserved and rural areas (Lake & Pushchak, 2007). Even if we do not teach online courses or engage with non-traditional student populations now, our colleagues in other departments and programs most likely already do and will continue to do so.

This presents an opportunity for those of us engaged in WAC and WID work. Online education puts writing front and center in courses across the disciplines. When writing rather than speaking becomes the primary mode of communication, faculty are encouraged to see writing as not just someone else's "problem" but as their responsibility. Interdisciplinary collaborations like ours capitalize on this opportunity and, in doing so, assist programs and faculty as they adapt to a new delivery method and different kinds of student populations with diverse needs. As our WEC project demonstrates, we can confront the challenges of online and blended education by working together to develop and deliver high quality curricula with a focus on writing.

## **Appendix A: Writing Plan for the Department of Graduate Nursing**

### **Writing Plan for the Department of Graduate Nursing**

#### ***Purpose***

This document outlines the major findings regarding the Department of Graduate Nursing's current implementation of writing into their curriculum and suggests recommendations that seek to increase the presence and relevance of writing as well as purposefully sequence writing tasks within their curriculum.

#### ***Background***

Faced with increasing frustration over teaching writing and the quality of student writing, the Department of Graduate Nursing, under the leadership of Dr. Sally Fauchald as chair, elected to partake in a pilot program based on the Writing-Enriched Curriculum (WEC) model at the beginning of the Spring 2012 semester. Their participation in the program will continue into the Spring 2013 semester.

In this pilot program, faculty within a department or program work with a trained composition and rhetoric faculty member, Dr. Heather Bastian, to review and evaluate current writing instruction in their curriculum in order to revise it to better meet the department's and students' needs. Throughout this process, Bastian works collaboratively with faculty to facilitate the effective

integration of writing into their curriculum. The goal of this process is create a curriculum that works to increase students' awareness of the importance of writing within their disciplines and students' discipline-specific writing abilities.

### **Methods**

During the Spring 2012 semester, the Department of Graduate Nursing Faculty and Bastian undertook the review and evaluation of current writing instruction within their BS to DNP program. This process began with a review of selected marked student papers, the corresponding assignments or rubrics, and the graduate program handbook by Bastian; an identification of courses for review by Fauchald; and a collection of syllabi and writing assignments for identified courses by Fauchald and Bastian. Faculty members were asked to email Bastian a draft of a writing outcomes statement for the Graduate Nursing programs using the guidelines and examples. Additionally, Bastian individually interviewed faculty members to supplement the collection of written documents.

Based on this collected data, Bastian created a Writing Outcomes Statement for the Graduate Nursing Programs that faculty revised and approved for use in both the BS to DNP program and the Master's program.

With the Writing Outcomes Statement approved for use, Bastian paired the existing courses and their assignments (the curriculum) in the BS to DNP program to the newly created writing outcomes to determine how and to what extent the curriculum currently is and is not meeting the writing outcomes.

### **Findings and Recommendations**

These findings are drawn from the analysis of the collected materials outlined above under "Methods." The recommendations are based on elements of composition and rhetorical theory and practice as well as the needs and resources of the Department of Graduate Nursing.

#### **Faculty Recommendation:**

##### *Finding 1*

Faculty members indicated that they spend a significant amount of time commenting on, marking, and grading student writing. My review of marked student work confirmed that faculty members do spend a significant portion of time on student papers with comments and corrections occurring numerous times on each page. My review also revealed that the majority of comments and corrections centered on APA format and grammatical errors (often the same errors repeatedly corrected within the same paper and, at times, across multiple papers from the same student) with relatively few comments engaging the papers' content.

Additionally, nearly all faculty members reported feeling overwhelmed when commenting on, marking, or grading student writing. Many stated that they did not believe that they were productively or efficiently using their time when commenting on student writing. Others indicated that they felt uncomfortable commenting and grading student writing in general and needed some direction and instruction.

##### *Recommendation 1*

A workshop on the marking and grading of student writing would benefit the nursing faculty. This workshop would introduce faculty to commenting and marking strategies, including marginal comments, end comments, and minimal marking, as well as time management techniques. Adopting these strategies and techniques would assist in decreasing the time that faculty spend commenting

on student work while increasing the value and productivity of the time that is spent and the comments that are made. After the workshop, faculty can elect to work one-on-one with Bastian to receive feedback that is tailored to their concerns and practices.

### ***Curricular Recommendations***

#### *Finding 2*

The comparison of the curriculum to writing outcomes showed that nearly all courses ask students to meet writing outcomes 1. Analyze and synthesize multiple scientific and scholarly sources from nursing and related disciplines to create a comprehensive review of the literature and 2. Identify a clear purpose for a writing task and demonstrate that purpose with evidence and analysis as well as their sub-outcomes. However, students appear to be provided with little to no instruction in terms of how to meet outcomes 1 and 2.

During their first year of study, students are expected to already be able to perform outcomes 1 and 2 with some proficiency without any direct instruction in them. In an ideal world, this would be the case. But, as many faculty indicated, several students struggle to meet outcomes 1 and 2 during their first years of study and throughout subsequent years. Given the population and nature of the program (with the majority of students returning to academia after several years in professional settings and others maintaining full- or part-time professional positions while in the program), this is a common situation.

#### *Recommendation 2*

During their first year of study, students need more support and direct instruction in meeting outcomes 1 and 2. Doing so will provide a foundation and practice in academic writing for those who need it most and a refresher for those who might need it less. Assignments during this first year can be broken down into separate assignments that provide more direct practice in academic writing skills. For example, students can be required to submit research questions, annotated lists of research articles, or thesis statements before writing their final papers.

#### *Finding 3*

The comparison of the curriculum and writing outcomes revealed that the current curriculum does not address writing outcomes 4. Engage in all aspects of the writing process or 4c. Critique their own writing in order to revise both global and local concerns. Students are not asked or required to show evidence of researching, drafting, revising, proofreading, or editing as they prepare for significant papers or projects in the courses. Additionally, the curriculum does not appear to show or teach students how to engage in the writing process or critique their own writing. The comparison also revealed that writing outcomes 4a. Develop ideas through interaction with others and 4b. Give and receive critical responses to writing are currently being met only through discussion board posts where students respond to other students' ideas but not necessarily their writing.

This suggests that students may not be regularly engaging in the writing process or with others as writers before submitting final papers and projects throughout their course of study. Neglecting to engage the writing process can negatively affect the quality of final papers both in terms of content and writing as well as the development of students as writers.

#### *Recommendation 3*

The writing process should play a more active and visible role throughout the curriculum. Courses undertaken during year 1 of the program would most explicitly incorporate and require elements of



the writing process (such as outlining, drafting, summarizing research articles, and revising) with less explicit and fewer requirements during years 2 and 3. Minimally, requiring students to compose and post drafts (with drafts carrying credit or a grade or affecting the grade of the final project) before submitting final projects in all courses would encourage more developed and careful writing.

The curriculum should also require students to more frequently engage each other as writers outside of blackboard posts. Doing so puts the responsibility for improving their writing onto the students and alleviates faculty time spent responding to student writing. The development of writing groups where students are required to read and respond to each other's drafts (with each response carrying credit or grade) within courses is one option.

#### *Finding 4*

All but one faculty member expressed concern with the use and quality of discussion board posts (DBPs). Concerns included the quality of student writing in the posts, the lack of student engagement with the prompts and with each other, the quality of student responses to each other's posts, the unclear purpose or role of DBPs within courses and the program, and the heavy reliance on DBPs as part of the curriculum. Many also indicated that DBPs are not achieving or encouraging interaction between students even though this is touted as one of their primary purposes.

The comparison of curriculum to writing outcomes confirms that DBPs do take on the bulk of student work and interaction throughout the program. A review of discussion board post assignment sheets also reveals that DBPs serve a limited and formal purpose: students are generally expected to post "mini-academic papers" and respond to two other students. DBPs also do not appear to directly contribute to final projects.

#### *Recommendation 4*

Extending the uses of DBPs and restructuring the role that DBPs play in the program would benefit faculty and students. Currently the use of DBPs is fairly narrow and requires formal academic conventions. DBPs can also serve less formal purposes, allowing students to interact with each other and explore ideas in less structured ways. They can be used to engage the writing process, especially at early stages when students are developing topics, collecting research, and developing outlines. Larger final projects can also be broken down into smaller DBPs. In short, DBPs can serve more purposes, especially as places of exploration, and be less formal in terms of APA format and other academic conventions.

DBPs also do not need to play as prominent a role within courses. The curriculum would benefit from creating different kinds of assignments outside of DBPs that encourage student interaction, as discussed in the previous recommendation. Experimentation with other mediums, such as blogs, wikis, and journals on Blackboard or Google docs and sites, is another option for encouraging more productive student engagement with course material and each other.

#### *Finding 5*

The comparison of the curriculum to the writing outcomes indicated a minimal presence of outcome 3. Engage in reflective clinical practice. More specifically, outcome 3a. Critically reflect on one's evolving role while transitioning from RN to APN/DNP only appears in NSG8000: Leadership in Healthcare during the first summer of study. Outcome 3b. Describe, explore, and self-critique the processes involved in independent, clinical decision-making plays a slightly more prominent role than 3a. in the curriculum. However, outcome 3b. is most present during the first year with four courses addressing it and then its presence decreases during the second and third years of study with two courses and then one course addressing it, respectively.

### *Recommendation 5*

Reflective clinical practice, especially self-reflection and self-critique, should be more consistently incorporated throughout the curriculum so that students can meet writing outcome 3. Journaling is a practice that encourages self-reflection and would help students engage in reflective clinical practice. A journal requirement that is incorporated into all or select courses and that carries between courses would help students engage in reflective clinical practice and allow them to chart their development throughout the program. Similarly, a separate and required self-reflection component could accompany the final applied research projects.

### **Conclusion**

During the Fall 2012 and Spring 2013 semesters, the Graduate Nursing Faculty and Bastian will work together to implement the recommendations listed above or adapt the recommendations so that they best serve the faculty, students, and program.

## **Appendix B: Writing Outcomes Statement**

### **Writing Outcomes Statement for the Graduate Nursing Program**

By the end of the MS program, students should be able to successfully perform 1-5. By the end of the DNP program, students should be able to successfully perform 1-6.

1. Analyze and synthesize multiple scientific and scholarly sources from nursing and related disciplines to create a comprehensive review of the literature
  - a. Locate appropriate literature related to an identified topic
  - b. Interpret and evaluate demanding scientific and scholarly readings
  - c. Create clear, concise, and logical summaries of sources
  - d. Establish connections between the sources, identifying similarities and differences, to present a coherent overview of an identified topic
2. Identify a clear purpose for a writing task and demonstrate that purpose with evidence and analysis
  - a. Develop a clear thesis statement that identifies a discernible purpose
  - b. Effectively integrate appropriate and relevant evidence from scientific and scholarly sources into writing with a balanced use of direct quotation, summary, paraphrasing
  - c. Analyze evidence to demonstrate its significance and relevance to the thesis statement
3. Engage in reflective clinical practice
  - a. Critically reflect on one's evolving role while transitioning from RN to APN/DNP
  - b. Describe, explore, and self-critique the processes involved in independent, clinical decision-making
  - c. Apply scientific and scholarly research to clinical practice
4. Engage in all aspects of writing processes including invention, research, drafting, sharing with others, revising in response to feedback, proofreading, and editing
  - a. Develop ideas through interaction with others
  - b. Give and receive critical responses to writing
  - c. Critique their own writing in order to revise both global (organization, development, focus, etc.) and local (grammar, usage, format, etc.) concerns
5. Demonstrate academic and disciplinary writing conventions

- a. Demonstrate mastery of Standardized Edited English
  - b. Properly and responsibly use APA style with no error
  - c. Create paragraphs that have a singular and developed focus
  - d. Demonstrate a logical organization in which paragraphs and sections are explicitly related to each other and remain focused on a purpose
  - e. Compose concise and precise prose
6. Propose, plan, implement, and evaluate an applied research project
- a. Analyze a current clinical practice to identify a problem and explore that problem in a review of the literature
  - b. Design, describe, and carry out an applied research project that uses appropriate research methods
  - c. Analyze and evaluate a project's data and results to establish their significance

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