

AN ORIGIN STORY ABOUT WAC/WID

NEAL LERNER

NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

IWAC 2016

KEY QUESTION:
IN A CLIMATE OF INCREASING
WID-IZATION OF THE CURRICULUM,
HOW HAS AN UPPER-DIVISION
REQUIRED WRITING COURSE—
CONTROLLED AND TAUGHT WITHIN AN
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT WRITING
PROGRAM—SURVIVED AND THRIVED?

THE NORTHEASTERN CONTEXT

- **Founded in 1898 as The Evening Institute for Younger Men in the YMCA building on Huntington Ave. in Boston.**
- **Initial academic programs were law, engineering, and business, i.e., a professional orientation.**
- **Focus on experiential education or “co-op”:** Most students complete two or more 6-month full-time work experiences, thus completing their degrees in five years (and creating a “middler year”).

THE ORIGINS OF MIDDLEL- YEAR WRITING

- **1983: The Faculty Senate approves a “revised university-wide English Writing requirement.”**
- **“It is imperative that students be given the opportunity to express their knowledge in writing, and that faculty make such written work a serious part of each course.”**

THE ORIGINS OF MIDDLEL- YEAR WRITING

- **Original resolution determined that students could fulfill middler-year writing requirement (MYWR) by taking one of several English Department writing courses (including Writing for the Professions with versions for Health Services, Business Administration, Computer Industry, and Criminal Justice)**
- **All of these courses preceded the new requirement.**

THE ORIGINS OF MIDDLEL- YEAR WRITING

- **Another option to fulfill the requirement was to take a 1-credit Writing Lab.**
- **After completing the Lab, within the following 12 months, “students will submit two pieces of writing (written that year for courses in the student’s major program) to the Writing Lab course staff for grading with respect to writing competence.”**

STUMBLING TOWARDS WID

“Since it is unreasonable to expect that students in all disciplines should show excellence in literary prose, the faculty responsible for Writing Lab should be sensitive to the genres in which their students will write as professionals. The focus of each Writing Lab section should be oriented this way. Evaluators of post-course writing samples should be able impartially to focus on mechanics and clarity of expression in material as various as corporate communication, research report or philosophical discourse.”

STUMBLING TOWARDS WID

In addition to creating the new requirement, Faculty Senate approved the following resolution:

“Be it resolved that all faculty members should be urged to emphasize written work in upperclass courses. Departments and college administrations should recognize the faculty time required for serious reading and grading of extensive written assignments, and should adjust loads or make other provisions for faculty who do so.”

THE ADOLESCENCE OF MIDDLEL-YEAR WRITING

- **1999: Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences writes that “I believe it is important that the College improve the writing skills of its students I call for us to increase the number of our [Core Curriculum] courses that require substantial writing.”**
- **“If we are serious about improving the quality of undergraduate education, the size of Core courses must be capped at the original benchmark of 30-50 students, a size that is more appropriate to address the issue of writing.”**

THE ADOLESCENCE OF MIDDLER-YEAR WRITING

- **2000: Northeastern begins the process of converting from quarter to semester system.**
- **English Department proposes combining a two-course First-Year Writing requirement into one course and retaining Middler-Year Writing:**
- **“Until students are required to write more often in all of their courses—both a pedagogical and budgetary problem, given the kind of attention that a commitment to improving student writing demands—the MYWR should continue to be the course tied to the Coop experience, not only for establishing the standard for successful college writing in their discipline, but in the workplace as well.”**

THE ADOLESCENCE OF MIDDLEL-YEAR WRITING

- **A 2001 “preliminary review” of MYWR noted that “the submission of work in the twelve months after completing the one-credit [Writing Lab] course was never actually used.”**
- **And that “Over time, the various Colleges requested that the English Department make additional four-credit courses available to their students; they found that their students were not benefitting from the one-credit course. At this date, no College is using the one-credit version for its students.”**

THE ADOLESCENCE OF MIDDLE-YEAR WRITING

- **2001: MYWR Preliminary Review for conversion to semesters:**
- **“Over the years, the English Department has modified [MYW] course content several times in response to various concerns within the English Department and across departments and Colleges. The most recent evolution, developed in the past five years, has moved the course generally into covering the following: exploratory writing, writing designed to help students research effectively and evaluate sources, research proposal writing, basic work correspondence formats, and extended, research-based report writing.”**

FROM MYWR TO ADVANCED WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

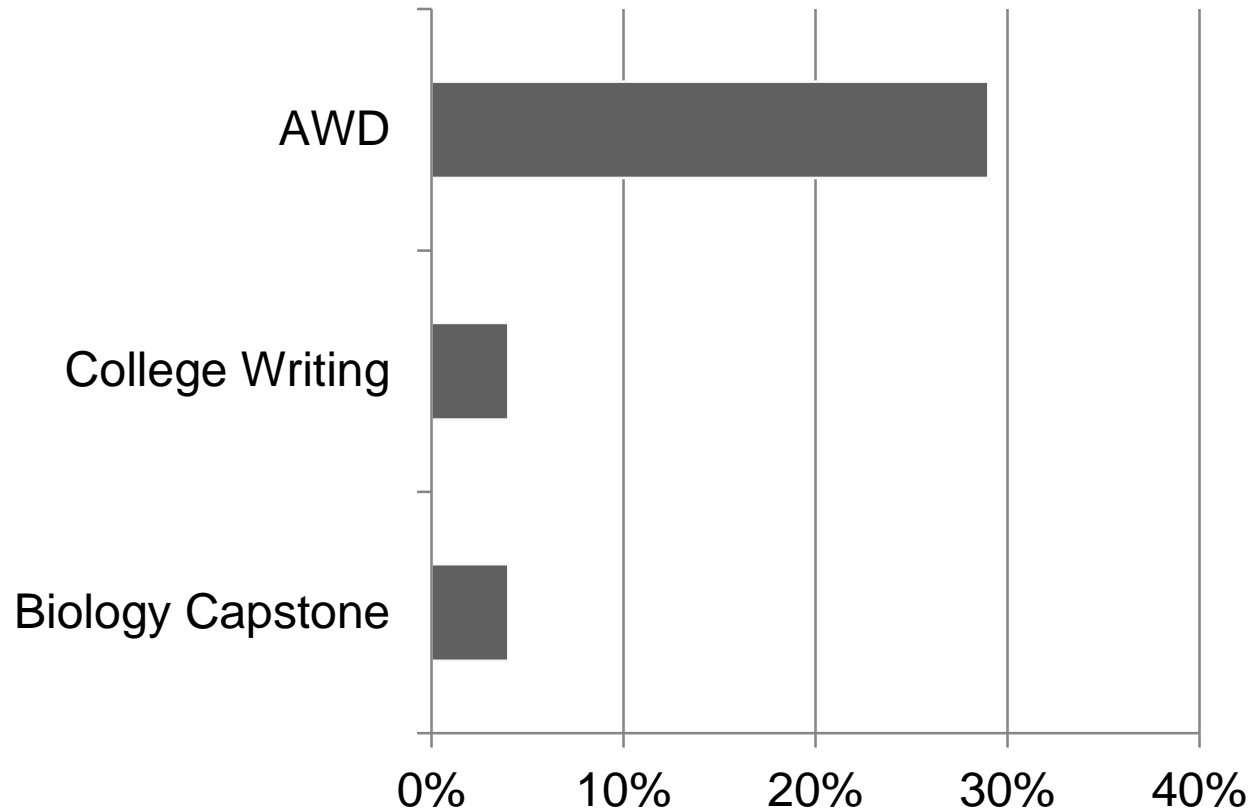
- **By 2003 and conversion to semester system, MYWR is renamed Advanced Writing in the Disciplines (AWD).**
- **In 2008, the Faculty Senate approves a Writing-Intensive course requirement: All undergraduates will need to take two WI courses in their majors, courses “characterized by frequent and regular writing, assessment and revision of student work, and the opportunity for students to improve their work.”**

2016: AWD AND WI

- **Writing Requirement (First-Year Writing, AWD, two WI courses) is unaffected by newest round of core curriculum reform.**
- **English Department Writing Program offers 11 disciplinary and one interdisciplinary version of AWD.**
- **Students find meaningful writing in AWD.**

AWD AND MEANINGFUL WRITING

Most cited NEU courses that offered opportunities for meaningful writing projects:



AWD: KEYS TO SURVIVAL

- **MYWR/AWD survives—and is strengthened by—several generations of core curriculum reform—including the most recent just last year.**
- **MYWR/AWD has always been more connected to students' co-op experiences than to their disciplinary class experiences; thus, students have been in primary control of content of their writing.**
- **Pattern of continual program review and seeking of input across campus sends a strong message that student writing is what's of most interest to English Dept. Writing Program, not necessarily credit hours.**

AWD: KEYS TO SURVIVAL (CONT.)

- **MYWR/AWD leadership—most notably Christiane Donahue from 1992 to 2002 and David Kellogg from 2004 to 2010—has been visible and innovative.**
- **Inability to address class size and teaching load continually derails attempts to strengthen writing in courses other than AWD—while AWD is capped at 19 in semester conversion.**
- **Inability of other disciplines to take ownership of writing instruction keeps AWD within English (with one exception—History Dept).**



THANK YOU!

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