First-Year Seminars and Senior Capstones
Bookending Writing Instruction in the Undergraduate Curriculum

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Diversity, Learning, and Student Success
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Writing remains a site of contention in higher education.
## Faculty Assessment of Student Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>FY/Sophomore</th>
<th>Junior/Senior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use paragraphs</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write for different audiences</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a main idea</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write for different purposes</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organize a paper</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use supporting evidence</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use correct grammar and syntax</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employ correct mechanics (e.g., spelling)</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>2.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record data and/or use detail</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesize information from multiple sources</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze data/ideas/argument</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote and paraphrase appropriately</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use, cite, and document sources</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Employers say the most emphasis should be placed on:

- Critical thinking and analytical reasoning (82%)
- Complex problem solving and analysis (81%)
- **Written and oral communication (80%)**
- The application of knowledge and skills in real-world settings (78%)
- The location, organization, and evaluation of information from multiple sources (72%)
- Innovation and creativity (71%)

*Source: Hart Research Associates (2013).* 
*It takes more than a major.*
Yet, we focus on skill development and miss the bigger picture on college writing instruction.
Good Writing Practices Lead to Gains In...

- Deep Learning
  - Higher-order thinking
  - Integrative learning
  - Reflective learning

- Other outcomes
  - Personal and social development
  - Practical competence
  - General education

Purpose

• Get high-level view of writing experiences at beginning and end of college
• Examine the extent to which two high-impact practices—first-year seminars and senior capstones—serve as sites for effective writing practice
• Consider possibilities for—and barriers to—bookending writing across the undergraduate experience
How Much Are Students Writing?

First-Year Students

Source: NSSE 2013 Frequency Distributions by Class and Gender.

www.sc.edu/fye
How Much Are Students Writing?

Source: NSSE 2013 Frequency Distributions by Class and Gender.
Writing Experiences in College

First-Year Students

- Prepared 2 or more drafts of a paper—51% (often or very often)
- Received feedback from faculty on draft or work in progress—65% (quite a bit or very much)

Seniors

- Prepared 2 or more drafts of a paper—45% (often or very often)
- Received feedback from faculty on draft or work in progress—62% (quite a bit or very much)

Source: NSSE 2013 Frequency Distributions by Class and Gender.
What Is the Impact of Effective Writing Practices on Student Learning?

NSSE Experiences with Writing Module

• Interactive writing processes
• Meaning-making writing tasks
• Clarity of writing expectations
**Interactive Writing Experiences**

*During the current school year, for how many writing assignments have you...*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>First-Year Students</th>
<th>Seniors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talked with peer or family member to develop ideas before writing</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received feedback from peer or family member before turning in assignment</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given feedback to a classmate about a draft/outline</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Percent responding *Most or All* writing assignments. NSSE 2013 Topical Module: Experiences with Writing
# Meaning-Making Writing Tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Task</th>
<th>First-Year Students</th>
<th>Seniors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summarize material</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze or evaluate</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe methods or findings (primary data collection)</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argue a position</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain numerical/statistical data</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write in style/format of specific field</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address real or imagined audience</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Percent responding *Most* or *All* writing assignments. NSSE 2013 Topical Module: Experiences with Writing*
WHERE ELSE ARE STUDENTS ENCOUNTERING WRITING IN THE FIRST YEAR?

English departments may be the default site for writing instruction in the first college year.
National Survey of First-Year Seminars

Purpose
• Administered triennially over past 25 years
• Types of first-year seminars
• Seminar features
• Student characteristics
• Instructional characteristics
• Administration
• Assessment
• Module on HIPs

2012-2013 Administration
• 3,753 institutions were invited to participate
• 896 campuses responded (23.9% response rate)
• 804 (89.7% of sample) indicated that they had one or more FYS
## Types of First-Year Seminars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seminar Type</th>
<th>Discrete Type (n = 788)</th>
<th>Primary Type (n = 786)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extended Orientation</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
<td>39.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic – Uniform Content</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic – Variable Content</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Study Skills</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional/Disciple-based</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Role of Writing in the First-Year Seminar

- Provide opportunities to produce and revise writing (42.5%)
- Writing skills are important course topic (17.3%)
- Developing writing skills is important course course goal (11.6%)
Role of Writing in the First-Year Seminar

- Writing-Intensive
- Important Topic
- Important Goal

All
Extended Orientation
Academic - Uniform Content
Academic - Variable Content
Where Do We See The Emphasis on Writing?

• In academic seminars of both types ($p < .05$)
  – Less likely in extended orientation and pre-professional seminars ($p < .05$)

• When section size in less than 19 ($p < .001$)

• When tenure-track faculty serve as course instructors ($p < .001$)
  – Less likely when student affairs professionals are instructors ($p < .001$)
# Evidence of Interactive Writing Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>EO  (n = 75)</th>
<th>AUC (n = 81)</th>
<th>AVC (n = 105)</th>
<th>Hybrid (n = 45)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructor feedback</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer review</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing center/writing tutor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative writing assignments</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Evidence of Meaning-Making Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment Type</th>
<th>EO (n = 75)</th>
<th>AUC (n = 81)</th>
<th>AVC (n = 105)</th>
<th>Hybrid (n = 45)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expository writing</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article review, critique, analysis</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline-specific writing assignments</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Other Types of Writing Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>EO  ((n = 75))</th>
<th>AUC  ((n = 81))</th>
<th>AVC  ((n = 105))</th>
<th>Hybrid  ((n = 45))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journal</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career exploration/academic planning</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal exploration/reflection</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic writing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response papers</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of inventories</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career-related documents</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business writing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evidence of Clear Expectations

• 44.3% of institutions that report seminars provides opportunities to produce and revise writing also assess writing as a course outcome

• 88.3% of institutions that identify development of writing skills also assess writing as a course outcome
WHAT ARE THE SITES OF WRITING INSTRUCTION FOR COLLEGE SENIORS?
National Survey of Senior Capstone Experiences

Purpose

- Types of capstone experiences being offered
- Structural characteristics and administration
- Instruction and pedagogy
- Assessment and evaluation of outcomes

2011 Administration

- 3,178 institutions were invited to participate
- 276 campuses responded (7.8% response rate)
- 268 (97.1%) report offering some type of capstone experience
# Types of Capstone Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capstone Experience</th>
<th>Discrete Type</th>
<th>Primary Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discipline-based course</td>
<td>84.7%</td>
<td>59.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior thesis/research paper</td>
<td>64.6%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibition of arts</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary course</td>
<td>33.2%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive exam</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* 27.5% of respondents reported offering a project-based capstone experience to their students, defined as senior thesis, internships, comprehensive exam, exhibition, or other.
Role of Writing in Capstone Experiences

- **Important Goal**
- **Important Topic**
- **Assessed Outcome**

![Chart showing the role of writing in capstone experiences across different categories: All, Discipline-Based, Interdisciplinary, Project.](chart)
Role of Writing in Capstone Experiences

- Final Project
- Thesis
- Curricular Portfolio

- All
- Discipline-Based...
- Interdisciplinary...
- Project
Writing Assignments in the Senior Capstone

- Original research projects
- Integrative literature reviews
- Professional portfolios
- Reflective portfolios
- E-portfolios
- Analyses of real-world examples/data sets
- Interdisciplinary research papers
- Business plans
- Conference papers
- Wikis
Interactive Writing Experiences?

The extent to which students have opportunities to give and receive feedback on drafts is unclear, though a review of the literature (Masiello & Skipper, 2013) suggests peer review activities and instructor conferences are built into many senior capstone experiences.
So What Does It All Mean?

• Many first-year seminars and senior capstones appear to deliver the kinds writing experiences that support deep learning.

• Yet, faculty and employers tell us students aren’t developing as writers to the extent that they should in college.

• Can we connect these two bookends of the college experience in a meaningful to improve student writing?
Some Possibilities

- Many seniors not prepared for the research writing required in the capstone.
  - Build capacity for independent research in senior capstone beginning in FYS with developmentally appropriate assignments
  - Create links between preprofessional or discipline-based first-year seminars where writing is less prominent and the capstone for the major
Some Possibilities

• Extended orientation seminars and many academic uniform content seminars include writing assignments centered on personal reflection and academic and career planning
  – Use academic/career planning exercises in FYS as a springboard for integrative reflection in the senior year
Some Possibilities

• The senior capstone serves as the site for assessment of learning in the major in particular or in the undergraduate experience more generally on many campuses.
  – Learning outcomes for the FYS can anticipate the outcomes for the capstone.
  – Instructor training and development for the FYS can help faculty map activities and assignments not only to FYS outcomes specifically but also to college outcomes generally.
Some Challenges

• How do we connect a largely centralized curricular initiative—the first-year seminar—to a decentralized initiative—the senior capstone—in a meaningful way?
  – What goals or learning outcomes have relevance both within general education and individual disciplines?
  – How do we articulate these?

• How do we support faculty teaching within these unique course models, especially around writing instruction?
Questions/Comments

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References


