Discussion Paper on Closing the Loop on the University Writing Project: 
Faculty Feedback from the University Writing Project 
Spring 2012 

In April 2011, faculty who had participated in the past two years 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 of the University Writing Project (UWP), were asked to provide feedback on how they had used the data that resulted from these assessments. This feedback or “closing the loop” request was conducted in addition to the annual survey of UWP participants’ experiences with the UWP. Specifically, this request was designed to better understand how faculty members were using the results of these assessments.

Methods 
Eighteen department chairs were contacted for feedback in April 2011. They were told that one or more faculty members from their departments had participated in the UWP the previous year and were requested to provide feedback from their faculty in the following three areas:

(1) How do you interpret the data on student writing abilities you have received in the past 1-2 years from the UWP?
(2) What actions, if any, have you taken, or do you plan to take, based on the results of the UWP Assessment?
(3) If you have taken any actions, what are the results of those actions?

Eleven of the eighteen, 61 percent, of the department chairs responded. These departments included representatives from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, College of Health and Human Sciences, and College of Engineering and Engineering Technology. Two departments included multiple responses as more than one faculty member had participated in the UWP, for a total of thirteen respondents.

Responses 
The feedback provided by the respondents fell into four areas: (1) how data were interpreted, (2) what actions had been taken based on data from the UWP, (3) what results had ensued from those actions taken, and (4) concerns/suggestions regarding the UWP process.

Data Interpretation:

(1) For some respondents, the data led faculty to believe that there is a need to focus more on writing skills in courses: One individual stated, “The UWP assessment appears to suggest that writing in (X course) is very slightly below the average of the university as a whole, and, thus, more emphasis should be placed on this aspect of the course.” Another said, “Students need to write more, have writing assessment more often and much sooner after the writing is completed.” Another, commenting on the most often reported area of writing deficiency, presentation, had this to say, “One of the definitive feedback I have received from the UWP about my students’ writing is their deficiency in “presentation” aspects of their writing…I actually display on the screen in my classes the comparison graphs you provide in the UWP report and emphasize that students should focus on improving the presentation aspects of their reports.”
Other respondents believed that no actions were needed: For example, one respondent said, “In each course (in the UWP), students met or exceeded expectations. Moreover, the scores were well above the average for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and were near the top across all colleges. I interpret this to mean we are producing students with strong writing skills.”

Data were sometimes interpreted as not meaningful. One individual reported, “I read the report, looking forward to feedback, and my impression was that there was nothing in the report that could be useful to me at all in helping me to be a better teacher.” This individual did not provide information on why it was not helpful or what could be included in the report that would be helpful to him/her.

Actions Taken:

(1) Related to the data interpretation that there was a need to focus more on writing skills in the classroom, several faculty members reported incorporating more writing and writing support into their courses and program curricula. As one faculty member stated, “I have prepared separate handouts to highlight and clarify presentation issues such as formatting, organization, etc., and have provided students with a checklist to help them check on the presentation issues before they submit their reports. I require students to submit the reports in three parts and I provide detailed feedback after each part.” Another stated, “I decided to ask students in the course to seek (assistance from the) Writing Center before submitting their papers…I posted the General Writing Rubric…in Blackboard for students to see before submitting their papers.” One respondent noted, “Faculty increased the amount of time devoted to writing instruction and feedback.”

(2) Some faculty respondents had worked to increase involvement in their departments in the UWP. For example, one stated, “Due to the importance of writing in the (X) curriculum, we have expanded writing assignments in the classes and increased the number of faculty members involved in the writing project assessment.” Another noted, “We have continued to participate in the UWP assessment to encourage the development of a longitudinal data set. We will make an effort to include courses already assessed in the past, as well as new courses, to make comparative writing assessments across our curriculum.”

(3) Some faculty took data back to their faculty meetings and/or assessment committees for further discussion. One respondent stated, “We used the feedback to discuss the low scores on “focus” and “presentation” in one of our assessment committee meetings.”

(4) At least one department had shared their data with external audiences, “Written abilities are discussed with (experts in the field) and with our advisory boards for ways to further develop more skill in our students.”

(5) Another department indicated that they used the results to raise awareness about student writing, “Faculty used the UWP assessments as part of an increased awareness of the importance of writing.”
Some respondents felt that no actions were needed, “I did not see anything definitive in the UWP data that justifies making large curricular changes.”

Results of Actions:

(1) Most respondents did not report on results of the actions they had taken, indicating that more time was needed to evaluate the results. For example, “The department has taken no action as a result of the UWP assessment,” and “I am waiting to see the feedback I receive this fall from the Office of Assessment Services, regarding changes in the (newly) submitted papers.”

(2) Others stated that the actions taken had not improved the students’ writing abilities. For example, “The presentation scores are not improving! It is certainly not an intellectually complicated task, as so their inability to pay attention to presentation aspects puzzles and frustrates me!”

Concerns/Suggestions Regarding the UWP Process:

(1) Concerns were expressed about the methodology of the UWP. One respondent stated, “Some faculty challenged both the accuracy and, ultimately, the relevance of such (statistical) analyses.” Further, faculty in this department “questioned the appropriateness of using ‘scores’ derived from the UWP assessment to compare across the departments. These faculty argued that, without equating for assignment types, student experience, and other confounding variables, such comparisons are inappropriate.”

(2) Concerns were expressed about the evaluation of the UWP papers by English faculty and instructors. One respondent stated, “What English promotes as good writing is not what (Department X) promotes as good writing…not finding the UWP useful has, I think, a lot to do with disciplinary differences.” This respondent included a writing rubric that is used in the department’s courses that he/she found more helpful. Another noted, “The student papers are technical and require a certain level of professional language that may be unfamiliar to the UWP evaluators…the student papers are written with very specific criteria in mind that is very different from the criteria used by the UWP.”

(3) By far the most frequently voiced concern was a request for broader faculty involvement in the UWP as evaluators: One respondent stated, “The (X program) faculty recommends that someone knowledgeable in (X) content be a member of the UWP team due to the technical nature of the (X) student papers. The (X) faculty also recommends revision of the evaluation criteria for (X) student papers.” Another noted, “The reading of the papers should be done by the faculty from various departments and colleges.”

Discussion
The UWP has been ongoing in some form since 1999. It is important for the Office of Assessment Services, the University Assessment Panel (UAP) and other campus constituents to reflect on the overall effectiveness of the UWP through this process of “closing the loop.” This paper will be discussed at a UAP meeting and recommendations will be sought. At this time, the Office of Assessment Services has the following recommendations:
(1) Delve deeper into understanding why some UWP participants do not find the UWP data useful. A question regarding improving the usefulness of the UWP data and report will be added to future surveys of UWP participants.

(2) Consider expanding the UWP evaluators to include faculty from departments other than the Department of English. A pilot with the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature will be undertaken in the 2012 UWP with Spanish faculty reading and evaluating papers from Spanish courses.

(3) Continue to contact department chairs on a regular basis for feedback on the effectiveness of the UWP in their departments.