History of the Writing Project

Northern Illinois University has had a long history of interest in the writing abilities of its students. From writing samples used to place students appropriately in their first college-level English courses, to the external review of dissertations, the university invests a significant amount of time and resources into the process of analyzing student writing. A number of current college committees have a direct interest in student writing abilities as well; among these are the University Assessment Panel (UAP), the General Education Committee (GEC), and the Writing Across the Curriculum Committee (WACC).

One project that was established specifically to measure student writing ability was the Junior-Level Writing Project. The project began formally in 1999, and was first administered using a writing assessment tool developed by American College Testing (ACT). In 2000, the group of faculty and administration spearheading the project made the decision to administer future iterations of the project using an institutionally developed prompt rather than the generic prompt supplied in the standardized instrument. The prevailing thought was that students would prepare a better writing sample if the prompt had a universal theme that could evoke an invested personal response. The topic selected involved participants’ reasons for choosing their college major/degree. That prompt, with only minor modification/clarification was used until 2004.

The Junior-Level Writing Project was administered annually in the spring semester. Faculty volunteers were solicited by means of a call letter. Those agreeing to take part in the assessment were required to designate one 50-minute class period in which the assessment would be conducted. During that class session, materials were distributed, the prompt was read, and students were instructed to write for the remainder of the period. At the end of the session, materials were collected and returned to the university’s assessment coordinator. The writing samples were scored by personnel from the Department of English who were selected and trained by a scoring coordinator also from English. Scorers were given copies of the students’ writing samples with names, majors, and other pertinent information removed, which they scored using a standardized rubric. Each sample was read by two scorers; any discrepancies were resolved by a third reader. The quantitative scores were then collected and populated in a spreadsheet which was later transferred to the Office of Assessment Services (OAS), and score reports were issued, along with letters of score explanation, directly to the students. The scoring coordinator from the Department of English also evaluated the writing samples qualitatively; data were summarized in a series of written documents detailing common qualities and circumstances, as well as trends in writing content by major. When all of the information was received, the assessment coordinator produced a summary document to distribute to participating faculty and college and university administration.

In the first years of the Junior-Level Writing Project, faculty (and therefore student) participation was high. The results of these assessments consistently showed that students demonstrated a range of writing skills, with an average slightly below the desired criterion of 8 on a 12-point scale. Over the course of the project however, participation fell dramatically. In 2002, when the initial call letter was sent to faculty soliciting participation, there was a response rate of 0 percent. The OAS immediately began a calling campaign soliciting volunteers. The most common reasons given for non-participation in this project were the use of a class period for
administering the assessment, and a lack of student engagement in the assignment. Based on this information, internal discussion of alternative methods to assess writing skills and abilities began. By spring 2003, the Junior-Level Writing Project was offered only as a special administration to the College of Business, and was no longer offered campus-wide.

Current University Writing Project

As a result of on-going discussions and a search of the literature, it became evident that a redesign of the Junior-Level Writing Project was needed. The interest in students’ writing abilities was still present university-wide, but the need for more focused writing became evident. The ever present assessment question “What can the student DO?” became the central issue and was translated into the question of “Can NIU students write effectively and at the required level of proficiency for the positions they will obtain after graduation?” As the call for assessment at both state and federal levels continues to increase, this question has taken on greater meaning.

The Junior-Level Writing Project was redesigned into the University Writing Project which was piloted in spring 2004 and spring 2006. Working with faculty in the College of Business, the OAS engaged in a course-embedded writing assessment involving the review of required course assignments rather than a standardized writing prompt. The rationale for this pilot was rooted in the need to determine students’ ability to write effectively and proficiently in their majors. When students are engaged in course required writing projects for their major, they are more focused because their grades depend on the quality of the work they produce. Students’ ability to synthesize, express, and accurately apply the content they have learned in their courses has a direct relationship to their ability to produce and work in their field post-graduation. Hence, the students should be more engaged in the assessment. In addition, there is no need for faculty to dedicate a class period for the assessment because they are submitting pre-existing course-embedded assignments. Therefore, the revised assessment process addresses both student engagement and class time concerns previously raised by faculty.

The following protocol was followed for the revised assessment process piloted in spring 2004 and spring 2006:

1) Writing samples to be scored were obtained from courses in the major (junior-level or above). The course instructors selected the writing sample to be scored.

2) Writing samples were obtained from work already required in the selected course; no new assignments were required.

3) As the writing sample came from course-embedded work, there was no need to use a class period for project administration.

4) Writing samples were collected from the selected course instructor; 2 copies were made and the originals were returned directly to the instructor by the participating department/college. There was no maximum number of pages for any one writing sample; a minimum of three pages of text was required. Copied results were transferred to the OAS; the course and college of origin were clearly identified by cover sheet on each set of samples. All returned writing samples continued to be used as a part of the course requirements/assignments.

5) Obtained samples were cleaned of identifying information by the OAS, and scored (as before) by trained scorers selected from the Department of English. Coordination of the
training and scoring process was done by faculty selected from the Department of English. The existing assessment rubric (utilized for the Junior-Level Writing Project) continued to be used. Scores obtained from the quantitative scoring process were entered in a spreadsheet, and results were transferred to the OAS for analysis. The qualitative review of writing samples was discontinued.

6) Results were tabulated by department and college in aggregate format. No distribution of scoring was made to participating students, but students were made aware of their individual scores and provided with a certificate for their participation.

7) The departmental writing samples were solicited during the months of April/May, and were turned over to the scoring unit in late May. Results from the scoring process were completed and submitted to the OAS by July of 2004 and 2006.

8) The final report of the pilot project was completed each year in the fall, with presentation of the report to the participating colleges and the Department of English. The final report was also made available to the UAP and other NIU bodies as needed.

**Analysis of College-Level Writing Ability/Skills: 2007 University Writing Project**

**Method**

After reviewing the results of the College of Business pilots of the University Writing Project, the General Education Committee decided that it would be beneficial to expand the project to the full NIU campus. The OAS expanded the 2007 University Writing Project to the whole campus with particular emphasis in the Colleges of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Health and Human Sciences, and Engineering and Engineering Technology. These colleges were contacted concerning plans for the 2007 University Writing Project in the fall of 2006. A total of 12 faculty and 430 students from the Colleges of Business, Engineering and Engineering Technology, Health and Human Sciences, and Liberal Arts and Sciences participated in spring 2007. In addition to the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, which will be targeted every year, greater emphasis will be placed on recruiting participation from the Colleges of Business, Education, and Visual and Performing Arts in spring 2008. The focus on colleges that administer undergraduate degree programs will continue to rotate from year-to-year with the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences being targeted every year along with two or three of the other five colleges.

The protocol that was followed for the revised assessment process piloted in spring 2004 and spring 2006 was also followed for spring 2007. The completed writing samples were transferred to the scoring coordinator from the Department of English and were evaluated according to the standardized assessment rubric previously developed by the department (see Table 1). Two independent scorers evaluated each paper and their combined scores were then entered into an Excel file for transmission to the OAS. Scores thus could range from 2 to 12. A score of 8 or better was considered acceptable. Additional data were gathered from Registration and Records in the fall of 2007 in order to determine whether ACT scores, cumulative grade point average (GPA), and/or English grades could be used to predict students’ performance on the University Writing Project. It was decided that this year’s scores will serve as a baseline for the examination of trends as additional data becomes available to the OAS over the next few years.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: English Department Criteria for Senior-Level Writing *</th>
<th>Descriptors Upper Half</th>
<th>Descriptors Lower Half</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates adequate understanding of the writer’s task while persuading reader of writers commitment</td>
<td>and responds to the full range of issues raised by the prompt</td>
<td>and demonstrates exceptional insight into the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishes an appropriate writer’s presence</td>
<td>and establishes a strong sense of the writer’s voice or authenticity</td>
<td>and uses this voice in an authoritative or innovative manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates communicative awareness of an educated audience outside the discipline</td>
<td>and communicates proficiently with this audience</td>
<td>and is able to communicate complex ideas effectively to this audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifies major aims, arranges material to support aims, and provides enough material to satisfy expectations of readers</td>
<td>and arranges material to create confidence in readers</td>
<td>and may show insight into problematic or provocative aspects of the topic, or generate a unique stance or original taxonomy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moves beyond summary into analysis and demonstrates critical engagement in the topic</td>
<td>and demonstrates complex critical engagement with material or formulates innovative relationships between ideas</td>
<td>and is able to theorize and conceptualize abstract ideas or draw additional implications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls sentence level features of written language, including grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage</td>
<td>and shows mature command of these features, particularly as regards clarity and precision</td>
<td>and exhibits mastery of these features in an especially effective or innovative rhetorical style.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. * Each writing sample was scored by two qualified readers from the Department of English. There was 98% agreement among readers with the criteria being that the readers either give the same score or adjacent scores to the writing sample. A third reader was brought in if there was not agreement, and the highest two of the three scores were given to the writing sample.
Results

Descriptive statistics examining students’ overall performance on the 2007 University Writing Project at the university, college, and course levels were initially conducted. A frequency table depicting how students scored overall on the 2007 University Writing Project can be found in Table 2. Scores from the assessment rubric could range from 2 to 12; with a score of 8 or better signifying acceptable performance on the University Writing Project. The mean score for all students was 7.48 with a standard deviation of 1.68. The designated standard score of 8 or better was met by approximately 54 percent of the students who participated. Frequency tables depicting students’ scores on the University Writing Project at the college level can be found in Appendix A.

Table 2: Frequency of 2007 University Writing Project Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \( N = 430. \)

The average score on the University Writing Project was also calculated for each of the colleges and courses. A comparison of students’ scores across each of the colleges can be found in Table 3. Students in the College of Business had an average score of 6.97 with a standard deviation of 1.49. The designated standard score of 8 or better was met by 41 percent of the students who participated from this college. The College of Engineering and Engineering Technology had a mean of 6.89 with a standard deviation of 1.90. Thirty-seven percent of the writing samples in this college were rated as having met the criterion score of 8 or better. The Colleges of Health and Human Sciences and Liberal Arts and Sciences had means and standard deviations of 7.79 and 7.64, and 1.60 and 1.75, respectively. The designated standard score of 8 or better was met by 64 percent of the students in the College of Health and Human Sciences, and approximately 54 percent of students in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted using SPSS in order to determine if the average scores in any
of the colleges were significantly different from one another. Results showed that the average score of students in at least one of the colleges was significantly different than the others, $F(3, 426) = 7.487, p = .00$. The Bonferroni post-hoc test revealed that on average, students from the College of Health and Human Sciences scored significantly ($p = .05$) higher on the University Writing Project than students from the Colleges of Business and Engineering and Engineering Technology. However, there was no significant difference between the average score of students in the College of Health and Human Sciences and students in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Table 3: 2007 University Writing Project Means per College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Average (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business (N=102)</td>
<td>6.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering (N=38)</td>
<td>6.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; Human Sciences (N=188)</td>
<td>7.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Arts &amp; Sciences (N=102)</td>
<td>7.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three separate univariate regression analyses were conducted in order to determine whether ACT scores, cumulative grade point average, and/or English grades could be used to predict students’ performance on the University Writing Project. Analyses revealed that ACT composite scores significantly and positively predicted students’ scores on the University Writing Project, $F(1, 285) = 33.065, p = .00; \beta = .322, p = .00$, accounting for approximately 10 percent of the variance in writing score. Cumulative GPA also significantly and positively predicted students’ scores on the University Writing Project, $F(1, 421) = 107.927, p = .00; \beta = .452, p = .00$, accounting for approximately 20 percent of the variance in writing score. Finally, last English grade significantly and positively predicted students’ Writing Project scores, $F(1, 407) = 19.585, p = .00; \beta = .214, p = .00$, accounting for approximately 5 percent of the variance in writing scores. These results indicate that the higher one’s ACT score, cumulative GPA, and/or last English grade is, the higher their score is likely to be on the University Writing Project. Cumulative GPA was the strongest predictor of writing score, followed by ACT scores, and last English grade. It should be noted however, that although these predictors are significant, they accounted for only 20 percent or less of the variance in writing score, indicating that they are not reliable predictors. The fact that last English grade only accounted for approximately 5 percent of the variance in University Writing Project scores suggests that there are many writing styles within courses and colleges across the university that differ from the style of writing in students’ English composition classes. Two additional univariate regression analyses were conducted in order to determine if last English grade was a stronger predictor of writing score for transfer or
non transfer students, but no significant differences were found. Last English grade significantly and positively predicted scores on the University Writing Project for both transfer, \( F(1, 167) = 8.014, p = .01; \beta = .214, p = .01 \), and non transfer students, \( F(1, 238) = 11.804, p = .00; \beta = .217, p = .00 \), still accounting for approximately 5 percent of the variance in both samples.

Finally, five additional one-way ANOVAs were conducted in order to determine whether there was a significant difference in the average score of students across the university and in each of the individual colleges who received A’s, B’s, and C’s in their last English course. Results indicated that the average score of students across the university was significantly different between at least one of the groups of students who received A’s, B’s, or C’s in their last English course, \( F(2, 405) = 10.981, p = .00 \). The Bonferroni post-hoc test revealed that on average, students who received A’s in their last English course scored significantly (\( p = .00 \)) higher on the University Writing Project than students who received either B’s or C’s in their last English course. However, there was no significant difference in the writing scores of students who received B’s or C’s in their last English course. This result was replicated in the College of Health and Human Sciences when conducting the analysis for each of the individual colleges, \( F(2, 171) = 10.003, p = .00 \). However, there was no significant difference between the writing scores of students who received A’s, B’s, or C’s in their last English course in the Colleges of Business, Engineering and Engineering Technology, or Liberal Arts and Sciences. Once again, these results suggest that there may be multiple writing styles within different colleges across the university that differ from the writing style in students’ English composition classes.

**Discussion**

After piloting the University Writing Project in spring 2004 and spring 2006, the course-embedded writing assessment was expanded to the full NIU campus in spring 2007. The results of the 2007 University Writing Project assessment indicate that although most students are demonstrating a writing ability at the designated standard, many are not, and there is much room for improvement in students’ writing abilities. Additional data were gathered from Registration and Records in the fall of 2007 in order to determine whether ACT scores, cumulative grade point average, and/or English grades could be used to predict students’ performance on the University Writing Project. ACT score, cumulative GPA, and last English grade were each found to be significant, positive predictors of students’ scores on the University Writing Project, however, they each accounted for 20 percent or less of the variance in writing score indicating that they are not reliable predictors.

The finding that English grades only accounted for approximately 5 percent of the variance in University Writing Project scores suggests that there may be several different writing styles within courses and colleges across the university that differ from the style of writing in students’ English composition classes. Further review of the standardized assessment rubric that was used to evaluate students’ writing samples led to the conclusion that the assessment rubric in its current form may not be general enough to address these writing styles. The Department of English is currently working on creating a more general writing rubric to be used for the University Writing Project in spring 2008.

The redesigned University Writing Project has provided many benefits and challenges to
the assessment of student writing ability at NIU. The benefits include: an authentic assessment of students’ ability to write effectively and proficiently in their majors; students’ engagement in the writing assignment; and an appreciation by faculty that students’ writing ability is an ongoing developmental process that students must be supported in throughout their academic careers at NIU. The challenges in the administration of the University Writing Project include: providing student writing samples that genuinely reflect their abilities; increased participation in the writing assessment by faculty and students across campus; and ongoing assistance to students in the development of their writing abilities.

A call for participation in the 2008 University Writing Project has been issued by the OAS (see Appendix B). As previously mentioned, the Department of English is currently working on creating a more general writing rubric to be used for the University Writing Project in spring 2008. The new assessment rubric should increase scorers’ capability to evaluate different writing styles within various courses and colleges across the university. In an effort to further increase participation in the University Writing Project by faculty and students across campus, the call for participation was posted in the Northern Today and on the OAS website. Direct calls have been made to faculty members across campus to increase involvement in the upcoming assessment. Greater emphasis will be placed on recruiting participation from the Colleges of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Business, Education, and Visual and Performing Arts in spring 2008.
APPENDIX A: College-Level Frequencies of 2007 University Writing Project Scores

2007 UWP Scores - College of Business

Mean = 6.97  
Std. Dev. = 1.486  
N = 102

2007 UWP Scores - College of Engineering

Mean = 6.89  
Std. Dev. = 1.9  
N = 38
2007 UWP Scores - College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

Score

Frequency

Mean = 7.64
Std. Dev. = 1.751
N = 102

2007 UWP Scores - College of Health & Human Sciences

Mean = 7.79
Std. Dev. = 1.6
N = 188

2007 UWP Scores - College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

Mean = 7.64
Std. Dev. = 1.751
N = 102
APPENDIX B: University Writing Project Guidelines

Introduction:

The University Writing Project (UWP) (formerly known as the Junior-Level Writing Project) was established in the mid-1990s to specifically measure the writing ability of NIU undergraduate students. The UWP has evolved into a course-embedded assessment of students’ written assignments. The Office of Assessment Services (OAS) invites faculty from across the campus to participate in the project each year by submitting completed course assignments to the OAS for review by faculty from the Department of English using a standardized assessment rubric.

Benefits of the UWP to Faculty and Students:

The benefits of the UWP are numerous:

1) Faculty members have ongoing input into the writing assessments. The course instructors who participate in the UWP will select the writing sample to be scored.

2) Faculty members are not asked to assign additional written coursework or give up valuable class time to participate in the UWP. Writing samples are obtained from work already required in the selected courses and, as the writing sample will come from course-embedded work, there will be no need to use a class period for project administration.

3) Faculty members will receive valuable feedback on the writing abilities of their students. Samples will be scored by trained scorers selected from the Department of English and results will be tabulated by department and college in aggregate format by OAS. These data may be used for ongoing program assessment and will contribute to the assessment of general education at NIU.

Faculty Participation:

Faculty choosing to participate in the UWP must agree to the following:

1. Faculty members will send a list of students’ names and Z-ID’s for each participating course to the OAS by February 15, 2008. These will be kept confidential.

2. Faculty members will send the instructions for the course assignment selected to the OAS to be shared with the English faculty evaluating the writing assignments by February 15, 2008. The maximum number of pages for any one writing sample is ten pages; a minimum if three pages of text is required.

3. Faculty members will send the student writing samples to the OAS no later than May 2, 2008 (these may be sent electronically or by hard copy).

4. Faculty will inform their students that course assignments will be submitted to the OAS for institutional, college, and program assessment.

5. Faculty will inform their students that the results of their individual assessments will remain confidential by the OAS and will not be shared with faculty, college administrators, or any other parties. Aggregated results will be made publicly available.

For more information, please contact Carolinda Douglass in the Office of Assessment Services at 753-7120 or by email at cdoug@niu.edu.