First-Year Composition Program Assessment Report

1. Explanation of Learning Objectives:

NIU’S WPA Outcomes for First-Year Composition (English 102/103/104/105)

Learning to write is a complex process, both individual and social, that takes place over time with continued practice and informed guidance. Therefore, it is important that teachers, administrators, and concerned public do not imagine that these outcomes can be taught or reduced in simple ways. Helping students demonstrate these outcomes requires expert understanding of how students learn to write.

These statements describe only what we expect to find at the end of first-year composition at NIU. As writers move beyond first-year composition, their writing abilities should be challenged, not only to diversify along disciplinary and professional lines, but also to move into new levels where outcomes expand, multiply, and diverge. For this reason, this statement encourages Writing Across the Curriculum courses to build on the following outcomes:

**Rhetorical Knowledge**

Students should be able to
- Establish a clear purpose for writing
- Identify and respond to the needs of different audiences
- Respond effectively to different kinds of rhetorical situations
- Use conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation
- Adopt voice, tone, and level of formality appropriate to the rhetorical situation
- Reflect on their own progress with regards to the above

**Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing**

Students should be able to
- Use writing and reading for inquiry, critical thinking, and communicating
- Recognize and write in a variety of genres, such as narration, argument, analysis, synthesis, and research
- Invent, articulate, and understand their own ideas as they relate to those of others
- Question or analyze the rhetorical appeals of written, graphic, or multi-media discourse
- Recognize the relationships among language, knowledge, and power

**Processes**

Students should be able to
- Understand that polished texts require multiple drafts for creation, development, and revision
- Develop strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proofreading texts
- Practice writing as a recursive process, that is, an ongoing process that allows writers to later invent and rethink as they revise their work
- Develop strategies for conducting efficient research
- Employ the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes, *i.e.*, learn to balance the advantages of relying on others with the responsibility of doing their part
• Use appropriate technologies for each stage of the writing process
• Assemble a portfolio as a demonstration of the writing process

**Knowledge of Conventions**
Students should be able to
• Apply appropriate genre conventions to their writing, including
  o Structure (sentence, paragraph, and essay levels)
  o Format
  o Documentation (where appropriate)
• Control such features as syntax, usage, punctuation, and spelling

2. **Methods:**

We randomly collect a student eportfolio from each section of each composition class, and in a series of half-day reading sessions, all members of our faculty score the eportfolios according to our newly revised programmatic rubric. At minimum, an eportfolio includes three documents: two pieces of writing from the course that represent the student’s best writing and a reflection on the student’s growth as a writer. Eportfolios may include more information, but these three documents are the focus of readers’ assessment. Eportfolios and readers are grouped to ensure that teachers are not reading eportfolios from their own classes, and each eportfolio is electronically scored by at least two different readers. A third reader is required only when the first two readers give an eportfolio non-adjacent scores.

A few days prior to the general scoring, group leaders themselves read, score, and discuss several “calibration” eportfolios. Each general scoring session begins with the group scoring the calibration eportfolios, and then results are discussed in the group. Additionally, group leaders use an administrative interface to the assessment engine that allows them to see and display scores from their group, and in the case of the calibration sets, from other groups as well. It is our belief that this calibration is an essential portion of the assessment process, both because it allows users to see and possibly adjust their scoring given a communal norm, and, more importantly, it facilitates a discussion about why certain features of a text are rewarded or penalized. Thus, we share among ourselves and come to some agreement about what we really value in student writing.

We use the following six-point Likert scale for programmatic assessment of students’ eportfolios.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>very poorly</th>
<th>poorly</th>
<th>somewhat poorly</th>
<th>somewhat well</th>
<th>well</th>
<th>very well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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The scale asks readers to assess writing skills in terms of their quality and frequency in the writing. Readers give a score of 1-6 for each of the following points on the rubric:

1. Student questions the rhetorical appeals of written, visual, or multimedia discourse (addresses the fourth point in the “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing” section of the outcomes)
2. Student invents, articulates, and understands his/her own ideas as they relate to those of others (addresses the third point in the “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing” section of the outcomes)

3. Student uses research to clarify and support a position in the context of an academic or professional conversation (addresses the fourth point in the “Processes” section and the second point in the “Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing” section of the outcomes)

4. Student demonstrates consistent awareness of desired impact on audience (addresses the second point in the “Rhetorical Knowledge” section of the outcomes)

5. Student demonstrates control over conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation (addresses the fourth point in the “Rhetorical Knowledge” section of the outcomes)

6. Student demonstrates control of voice, tone, and level of formality appropriate to the rhetorical situation (addresses the fifth point in the “Rhetorical Knowledge” section of the outcomes)

7. Student demonstrates control of sentence structure (addresses the first and second points in the “Knowledge of Conventions” section of the outcomes)

8. Student demonstrates control of paragraph structure (addresses the first point in the “Knowledge of Conventions” section of the outcomes)

9. Student demonstrates control of document level structure (addresses the first point in the “Knowledge of Conventions” section of the outcomes)

10. Student reflects on his/her progress over the semester (addresses the sixth point in the “Rhetorical Knowledge” section of the outcomes)

11. Holistic impression

In addition to scores given for the above rubric, readers are also asked to provide commentary on features of the reflection that are worth noting, such as insightful discussion of classwork or the writing process; this commentary addresses the sixth point in the “Rhetorical Knowledge” section of the outcomes. Readers may also provide commentary on any features of the eportfolio – either in the primary evidence or in the reflections –that the above questions do not address. Finally, readers may place check marks next to applicable strengths or weaknesses from the following list: audience, voice, representation, focus, genre, presentation.
3. Available Data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fall 2011 FYComp Eportfolio Assessment Results</th>
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<tr>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>ENGL102</th>
<th>ENGL103</th>
<th>ENGL104</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46 readings, 23 portfolios</td>
<td>138 readings, 61 portfolios</td>
<td>48 readings, 18 portfolios</td>
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**Question 1:**
Student questions the rhetorical appeals of written, visual, or multimedia discourse

**Question 2:**
Student invents, articulates, and understands his/her own ideas as they relate to those of others
Question 3: Student uses research to clarify and support a position in the context of an academic or professional conversation.

Question 4: Student demonstrates consistent awareness of desired impact on audience.

Question 5: Student demonstrates control over conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation.
Question 6: Student demonstrates control of voice, tone, and level of formality appropriate to the rhetorical situation

Question 7: Student demonstrates control of sentence structure

Question 8: Student demonstrates control of paragraph structure
Question 9: Student demonstrates control of document level structure

Question 10: Student reflects on his/her progress over the semester

Question 11: Holistic impression

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### Spring 2012 FYComp Eportfolio Assessment Results

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<th>ENGL 103</th>
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<td>Poorly</td>
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<td>Often</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question 1: Student questions the rhetorical appeals of written, visual, or multimedia discourse</td>
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<table>
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<th>Question 2: Student invents, articulates, and understands his/her own ideas as they relate to those of others</th>
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<th>Question 3: Student uses research to clarify and support a position in the context of an academic or professional conversation</th>
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<th>Question 4: Student demonstrates consistent awareness of desired impact on audience</th>
<th>Insufficient data</th>
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<tbody>
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</table>
Question 5: Student demonstrates control over conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation

Question 6: Student demonstrates control of voice, tone, and level of formality appropriate to the rhetorical situation

Question 7: Student demonstrates control of sentence structure

Question 8: Student demonstrates control of paragraph structure

Insufficient data
4. **Use of Results:**

The above data represents what is effectively a single data point (academic year 2011-2012) and thus should not be interpreted as connoting trends. Data from Fall 2012 and Spring 2013, which begin the second data point, is still being organized and evaluated. However, the data that we have collected suggests that the instrument itself appears both sound and valid, as it indicates a general progression of skill through the course sequence. We found it curious that there appears to be a strong correlation between control of document-level structure and the holistic score, but we will not make suggestions for programmatic changes until we have collected more information from which we can identify real trends.

5. **Gaps in Current Data:**
Because we currently have only one full data point, it is too early to identify problematic findings or gaps in data. Once we have collected more information, we will be able to analyze the results to determine whether changes should be made in further studies.

6. **Timeline:**
We plan on collecting additional data during finals week of each semester for the foreseeable future.

7. **Resources Needed:**
Formerly, the office of the Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Development provided about $3000 per semester for a professionally-trained Holistic Scoring Team to score portfolios. This support ended in 2008, and we moved to a scoring system that required every teacher in the program to put in at least a half-day of work. We would appreciate funding in the amount of $400 per semester to provide lunch and snacks for 60-70 GTAs and instructors who do the scoring.

We also currently rely on the volunteer work of an SPS staff member to help us with data aggregation and statistical analysis, but we often have to wait months until she has time. We would appreciate funding to buy the time of a professional to do this work.

8. **The Bigger Picture:**
The process described above is only one of many assessment measures used by the First-Year Composition Program to collect information about how well it is doing. Other measures include:

- Student grades
- Student evaluations of instruction
- Service reports from instructors in the program
- Periodic questionnaires on attitudes toward writing, textbooks, and eportfolios
- Town meetings with input from all instructors and GTAs

9. **Possible Longer-range Directions:**
Since NIU’s involvement as a member of the first cohort of the National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research, 2004-2007, we have envisioned the First-Year Composition eportfolio as the cornerstone of what would become each NIU student’s longitudinal general education eportfolio. To that end, I submitted Strategic Planning proposals in 2008 and 2011, but these were not funded. We are still very much interested in working with other units at NIU, including the Office of Assessment, Faculty Development and Instructional Design, the General Education Committee, the University Writing Center, and Writing Across the Curriculum to help NIU design a longitudinal general education portfolio assessment that makes use of best practices in the wider international college assessment community.

As a first step, the Assessment Subcommittee of the First-Year Composition Committee will be working on a process for articulating our program outcomes and scoring rubric with the
American Association of Colleges and Universities’ VALUE Written Communication rubric, so that data from our assessment will be comparable to other VALUE assessments on campus.