Division of Academic Affairs

First-Year Composition Program

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## 1. History and Context

## Introduction to FYComp at NIU

Formerly known as Freshman English, the First-Year Composition Program offers required foundational writing courses to mainly first-year NIU students, who take a two-semester sequence of three credit hour classes. In 2000, to keep current with disciplinary terminology used at other universities, the name of the program was changed to First-Year Composition, which is abbreviated as FYComp. In the heyday years of 2002 to 2008, we offered over 300 courses per year, employing 30 full-time unionized instructors and 65 Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) to teach the classes. Currently, with enrollment declines, we only offer about 160 courses per year, taught by 13 full-time unionized instructors and 55 GTAs. Our mission also includes offering foundational writing courses in two other areas, developmental composition in a "stretch" program for approximately 500 students admitted through the Deacon Davis CHANCE Program, and ESL composition for undergraduate and graduate non-native speakers of English.

FYComp's administration includes a director (Full Professor), an assistant director (SPS), a technology coordinator (SPS), and an Office Support Specialist (Civil Service). Its self-governance takes the form of a FYComp Committee, chaired by the director and including SPS, instructors, and GTAs, that meets every two weeks to advise the director on policy, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, outreach, and professional development. In the fall semester, FYComp participates in the NIU Common Reading Experience by having every student read that year's choice, holding an open mic event for student presentations, hosting the author for events (when possible), and organizing an essay contest and awards ceremony for FYComp students. In the spring, FYComp holds the annual Showcase of Student Writing, involving approximately 400 students in groups of about four, who present their research to an audience of peers, family, faculty, administrators, and other NIU/DeKalb/Sycamore stakeholders. At the end of the spring semester, FYComp holds an awards ceremony at which it honors excellence in student writing (through five major award categories), as well as excellence in teaching FYComp.

FYComp and the English Department take professional development very seriously. After a full week of orientation at the end of the summer, new GTAs at both the MA and PhD level are required to take two semesters of English 600, Seminar in the Teaching of College English, which is a three-hour per week practicum course geared toward supporting and developing new writing teachers, and introducing them to the NIU FYComp approach to teaching writing. FYComp holds a full-day orientation before the start of the fall semester, and a half-day orientation before the start of the spring semester. At these events, we routinely host guest speakers on issues such as dealing with traumatized students, cultural competency, responding to student writing, and writing across the curriculum. Approximately once a month, we also host professional development workshops which generally feature speakers from our program who have new strategies to share, but occasionally include guest faculty from other NIU departments, who brief us on how writing is assigned and assessed in their programs.

**History, focusing on assessment and other contributions to the university**

When I took over as director in 2002, we were very concerned about two issues that face writing programs: 1. How to maintain consistency across 100 sections of a single class, and 2. How to assess the program so as to measure student success and "close the feedback loop" by learning from our assessment results and making appropriate changes. Within the writing studies discipline at that time (and currently), there were two assessment-related processes that were considered best practices: 1. Developing appropriate programmatic outcomes from the ground-up, using the Council of Writing Program Administrators' Outcomes Statement as a model, and 2. Developing an electronic portfolio-based assessment system in which randomly sampled student portfolios would be scored against a rubric developed from our self-generated program outcomes. During my first year, with the First-Year Composition Committee, we developed a set of program outcomes, known as the FYComp Program Outcomes, workshopped and modified them with the entire FYComp faculty, and then publicized them on our program web page, so that instructors could achieve consistency among the many sections of the class by developing curriculum and pedagogy, as well as selecting texts, with the FYComp Outcomes in mind. We have updated those outcomes, based on our current perceptions of what skills students need to be able to demonstrate, on the average of every three years.

In 2003, we began using a very simple assessment of randomly selected FYComp students based on papers that they submitted electronically on an online file exchange system called WebBoard. Soon thereafter, with Dr. Brad Peters (NIU Writing Across the Curriculum Coordinator) and Eric Hoffman (Technology Coordinator), and with the support of then-provost Gip Seaver, I applied for NIU to become part of the first cohort of ten universities and colleges participating in the National Coalition for Electronic Portfolio Research (NCEPR). Our participation and collaboration with the other schools and leaders Kathleen Blake Yancey, Barbara Cambridge, and Darren Cambridge, allowed us to develop and in 2005 introduce a completely new electronic portfolio (ePortfolio) assessment system using Netscape Composer for student web pages, and using a home-grown collection, sorting, and scoring engine created by Eric Hoffman, to allow our holistic scoring team to give both holistic and trait scores to randomly selected FYComp student portfolios. The holistic scoring team is a group of thoroughly trained and calibrated instructors and GTAs who, in addition to scoring ePortfolios, also score the CHANCE and optional FYComp placement essays, as well as university-wide submissions to the University Writing Project.

From July 2008 to June 2010, I did not direct the FYComp program, and in my stead, Dr. Bradley Peters had faculty collect paper portfolios from students, and had the entire faculty come together at the end of each semester in a large room to score those portfolios on a three-point scale. When I returned to directing the program in 2010, we maintained that system for one year, to allow us to collect three years of data using the same system. In 2011, we switched back to ePortfolios, and took advantage of the utility and convenience of Google Sites as a platform for students to create their portfolios. After revising our outcomes, we settled on a six-point scoring

scale with a holistic score and six traits, plus a space for qualitative comments. As the funding for the holistic scoring team had been withdrawn, we continued to require all FYComp instructors and GTAs to come together to score portfolios at the end of each semester, but to cut down on noise and distraction, we had them work in teams of 10-20 in computer labs, with a trained assessment leader facilitating calibration discussion and scoring. As we continue to do now, we have them scoring in our own assessment engine, and the scores automatically populate a database from which we can identify trends and generate graphs comparing student populations, semesters, and years of data.

Seeing promise for campus-wide ePortfolios, especially after presentations by Dr. Kathleen Blake Yancey and Dr. Helen Barrett, I submitted a Strategic Planning proposal to the NIU president and provost in 2007. At that point, I was told that it was too early for such an initiative, but in 2011 I renewed efforts to coordinate student reflective learning and assessment in general education classes by submitting a new Strategic Planning proposal and working with then Vice Provost Dr. Michael Kolb and Office of Assessment Services Director Dr. Chris Parker to support student self-evaluation with longitudinal general education ePortfolios. Along the way, in the creation of the Progressive Learning in Undergraduate Studies (PLUS) program, we changed ENGL 104 and 105 to collaboration and writing across the curriculum-based classes, now numbered ENGL 203 and 204. This meant updating our outcomes again, along with significant faculty development. We also received some support for programmatic assessment in exchange for updating our outcomes and scoring scale to better correspond to the AAC&U VALUE rubrics in written communication, critical thinking, and information literacy, and moved from a six-point to a four-point scoring scale. For a number of years, the Office of Assessment Services submitted data collected from FYComp ePortfolio scores to satisfy its Voluntary System of Accountability requirement.

In November 2013, NIU held a retention summit at which FYComp was identified as a key program in making or breaking students' impression of, and connection to, the university. FYComp held its own retention summit in January 2014, and it was attended by the president, provost, and other key administrators. Out of this summit emerged at least ten initiatives that we implemented in our classes, but the Peer Advocate program is probably the most significant. With funding from the Office of the Provost, for five semesters, we placed up to 40 advanced undergraduates in FYComp classes as agents of engagement, to help students feel connected to NIU. We worked with Dr. Chris Parker to develop an assessment to measure the impact of the PA program on student success and retention, but in the end, we could not separate out the PA program from other FYComp retention initiatives as making any difference in whether students stayed or left NIU. One thing was clear: students who took FYComp felt connected to NIU and stayed at greater rates than those who had not taken these classes. However, NIU was entering uncertain financial territory with the state budget impasse, and funding was discontinued. I published an account of these efforts in "Undergraduate Mentors as Agents of Engagement: Peer

Advocates in First-Year Writing Courses," published in *Retention, Persistence, and Writing Programs* (Utah State University Press, 2017).

With Drs. Parker and Kolb, I continued my efforts to support student learning at NIU through ePortfolios. We held an NIU ePortfolio Symposium in September 2014, featuring ePortfolio pioneer researchers Dr. Bret Eynon and Dr. Laura Gambino, and attended by dozens of NIU faculty and several partners from nearby regional higher education institutions. As it had after the ePortfolio Summit with Dr. Yancey in 2005, it seemed as if we were about to make a breakthrough at NIU, with more coordination among departments, moving toward a longitudinal general education ePortfolio. The ePortfolio was included as a feature in planning for the NIU PLUS program, and the Office of Assessment Services, Faculty Development and Instructional Design, and other units signed on to support the latest Strategic Planning proposal. The Council of Deans considered ePortfolios in a meeting, and the ePortfolio became, at least in planning, a central feature of First and Second-Year Experience's UNIV 101 classes.

The involvement from partners at other regional institutions led us to create what we called the Illinois Regional ePortfolio Partnership, and to plan a series of regular meetings to coordinate our efforts to support each other's work and support students in creating ePortfolios to facilitate transfer among Illinois colleges and universities. Key institutions in the Northern Illinois P-20 Network signed on to support the initiative, and we held three meetings in 2014 and 2015. However, with the state budget impasse and the departure of Drs. Parker and Kolb, our efforts at both institutional and inter-institutional ePortfolio coordination were put on hold. I presented on "scaling up" to institutional and inter-institutional ePortfolio initiatives at several conferences, and at two universities in Japan and five in the U.S. These efforts are described in the book chapter "Electronic Portfolios: Scaling Up from Programmatic to Inter-Institutional Articulation and Assessment," accepted for publication in *ePortfolio@edu*, which is under contract with Colorado State University Press.

To demonstrate our commitment to coordinating our ePortfolio assessment with efforts across the university, in 2015, we switched ePortfolio platforms from Google Sites to Blackboard. Students are familiar with Blackboard, so they don't have to learn a new interface. However, the Blackboard ePortfolio interface is a poor-to-fair solution at best, mainly because it considers the portfolio as a snapshot of work at a particular date and time, not as a living and growing set of self-evaluative student artifacts and reflections. If our efforts to coordinate longitudinal, general education ePortfolios with other units on campus do not pan out, we will most likely switch back to Google soon, as that platform better reflects our philosophy of ePortfolio pedagogy.

In 2016, we were asked to report to the CLAS NIU Equity Gap Team on our initiatives to close the performance (GPA) gap between white and minority NIU students. We had always relied on a hunch that students largely failed FYComp classes (D or F grades) because they either did not come to class, did not do the work, or both. We initiated a Student Success Survey that year, and have collected data to show that our hunch is correct. We can also report on success rates for

different populations and different teacher categories. We do know that the extra support we give FYComp students, especially CHANCE students, who have smaller classes, required tutorial hours, and a one-year "stretch" program to complete ENGL 103, makes a big difference in their ability to succeed.

## 2. Mission, Goals and Objectives, and Program Outcomes

*Mission Statement*

The complexities of modern life demand that students be able to interact critically with the pressures that shape their identities and their environment. In its requirement of core competency in Rhetoric and Composition, Northern Illinois University understands writing as central to discovery and learning, to analysis and communication, and to the critique of social order. The First-Year Composition classroom assumes the responsibility to demonstrate ways in which a community of writers can empower one another to participate in the important political, ethical, and cultural discussions of our time by teaching one another the value, power, and pleasure of words.

The First-Year Composition Program at NIU prepares students for participation in the academic and professional discourses that they will encounter in their undergraduate studies. To that end, the program develops students' abilities to read and think critically and to write meaningfully in response to what they read. The writing process is viewed as a way for students to develop their thoughts, to create meaning, and to construct texts that address personal, public, and professional issues.

Specifically, the goals of First-Year Composition are to help students write effectively in an academic setting. To write effectively, students must discover what they want to say and take responsibility for saying it to particular audiences. The program begins by helping students explore the resources for writing they bring with them and by helping them develop those resources so that they can write confidently and competently about topics of public concern to a public audience. This work serves as a foundation for guiding students to observe, analyze, report on, and contribute to one or more of the professional conversations that are always under way in every field. To achieve these goals, students engage in a wide range of activities: talking, listening, and reading critically; interacting with the ideas and arguments of other writers; locating public and professional information; and discovering how to use it.

*Unit Goals and Objectives*

## Introduction

By way of explanation, First-Year Composition has never had a set of goals and objectives, only the program outcomes (see below) that we use to identify student competencies in the skills

required by our program. What follows is a draft of completely new goals and objectives for the FYComp program.  We invite feedback from readers of this report.

**Goal 1. Meet the changing needs of an increasingly diverse population of first-year students**

Objective 1. Provide a seat for every entering first-year student in a section of ENGL 103 by carefully planning and adjusting each semester's schedule of classes and staffing.

Objective 2. Publicize, administer, and score placement tests for CHANCE and regular admits.

Objective 3. Offer alternatives for advanced and honors students through ENGL 204.

Objective 4: Offer online FYComp for students not physically able to come to NIU.

Objective 5. Offer ESL classes for non-native speakers of English.

Objective 6. Periodically review curriculum and texts for relevance/inclusiveness for students from diverse backgrounds.

**Goal 2. Meet the changing needs of a diverse population of transfer students**

Objective 1. Publicize Illinois Articulation Initiative and NIU FYComp guidelines for transferring classes.

Objective 2. Evaluate transfer worksheets for NIU transfer credit on a timely basis.

Objective 3. Offer off-cycle sections of ENGL 103 and 203.

**Goal 3. Provide quality instruction in writing**

Objective 1.  Train new GTAs in teaching writing in ENGL 600, a practicum seminar, for a full year.

Objective 2. Provide regular opportunities for faculty development to GTAs and Instructors, including orientations and faculty development workshops.

Objective 3. Maintain a continuing dialogue about practices, strategies, and performance through faculty assessment calibration, mentoring, and peer observations.

Objective 4. Close the feedback loop through monitoring of student evaluations and grades.

Objective 5. Evaluate instructors annually, new GTAs every semester, and advanced GTAs periodically for purposes of letters of recommendation.

**Goal 4.  Make the program administration and staff welcoming to and respectful of all students and colleagues**

Objective 1. Require cultural competence training for all new GTAs.

Objective 2. Employ practices that avoid the "Huskie Shuffle;" that is, help students and faculty get help in a timely fashion.

Objective 3. Train office staff, administration, and faculty in inclusive interpersonal communication practices.

Objective 4. Respond promptly to student/faculty complaints and grade appeals.

**Goal 5. Celebrate and publicize writing, specifically our students' wor**k

Objective 1. Coordinate and hold awards ceremonies for a variety of essay contests.

Objective 2. Coordinate and hold open mic events for sharing our stories.

Objective 3. Coordinate and hold the annual Showcase of Student Writing.

Objective 4. Participate in the Common Reading Experience in partnership with FSYE office.

Objective 5.  Publish and publicize collections of student writing such as *Contemporary Voices*.

**Goal 6. Collaborate with other NIU units to support student retention and success**

Objective 1. Work with General Education/PLUS Program to make our courses fit the overall NIU general education plan.

Objective 2. Work with OSEEL and FSYE to provide Themed Learning Community and mentoring opportunities for students.

Objective 3. Work with Honors, Office of International Studies, University Libraries and CHANCE to coordinate our efforts.

Objective 4.  Work with CLAS Equity Gap Team to measure our equity gap and employ strategies to narrow it.

Objective 5. Maintain required and supplementary tutorial services through the Writers' Workshop and ESL Center, and coordinate student and faculty interactions with the University Writing Center.

Objective 6. Respond to requests for information and collaborate with other NIU units on large-scale initiatives such as Strategic Planning, Program Prioritization, Assessment, and Accreditation.

**Goal 7. Assess student progress in writing skills**

Objective 1. Use faculty development opportunities to share strategies in individual and group assessment with all faculty.

Objective 2. Develop and periodically revise program outcomes to reflect student learning outcomes for FYComp.

Objective 3. Collect and randomly sample portfolios from writing classes for programmatic assessment.

Objective 4. Calibrate faculty assessment groups through test scoring and discussion of model portfolios exhibiting differing student skill levels.

Objective 5. Score and qualitatively comment upon the sampled portfolios.

Objective 6. Debrief with scoring group leaders on the assessment process and overall trends in student progress.

Objective 7. Use both qualitative and quantitative assessment data to inform program decisions in curriculum, pedagogy, texts, and faculty development.

Objective 8. Share assessment results with NIU stakeholders.

**Goal 8. Use appropriate technologies in the teaching of writing**

Objective 1. Use Blackboard and other online technologies to support student learning.

Objective 2. Use appropriate technologies, such as computer labs and/or Bring Your Own Device classrooms to support student learning.

Objective 3. Teach critical literacy strategies for all resources and technologies.

Objective 4. Provide faculty development for the above through the Networked Writing and Research facility, its coordinator, and faculty interns.

**Goal 9. Monitor and update our policies, procedures, texts, assessments, working conditions, classroom spaces and technology through shared governance**

Objective 1. Compose a representative FYComp Committee each year and meet every two weeks.

Objective 2. Meet as a faculty in orientations twice a year.

Objective 3. Publish and publicize relevant policies and procedures.

Objective 4. Reconsider textbook options every two years with an eye toward student cost, inclusiveness, and program outcomes.

Objective 5. Publicize shared office guidelines and remind faculty to follow them.

**Goal 10. Identify, design, and maintain classroom facilities for teaching writing**

Objective 1. Work with central scheduling and DoIT to reserve classrooms well in advance of each semester.

Objective 2. Identify revenue sources to support classroom spaces that incur a charge.

Objective 3. When institutional support structures change, work with the Provost and College to come up with innovative strategies to meet space/technology needs.

Objective 4. Respond to ongoing faculty concerns about safety, comfort, and utility of existing classrooms.

**Goal 11. Share our strategies with outside colleagues, and let their strategies inform our practice**

Objective 1. Partner with community colleges and universities when opportunities arise, as part of existing (e.g. P-20 Network) and new initiatives that include NIU.

Objective 2. Support faculty development opportunities for FYComp faculty to attend, present, and network at conferences such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the Allerton English Articulation Conference, and the annual Computers and Writing Conference.

Objective 3. Invite key figures in writing studies to give presentations and lead workshops.

Objective 4. Publish accounts of our research findings both in print and on the web.

*Unit Outcomes*

**Introduction**

This statement describes common knowledge, skills and attitudes we seek in our first-year composition program in both online and traditional writing classrooms; that is we seek to outline the programmatic expectations for English 103/203/204. The following statement articulates what composition teachers have learned from practice, research and theory. This document defines "outcomes" or types of results and should be used in conjunction with appropriate rubrics to measure levels of achievement.

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. For this reason, we expect the primary audience for

this document to be well-prepared college writing teachers and college writing program administrators. Among such readers, terms such as "rhetorical" and "genre" convey a rich meaning that is not easily simplified. While we have also aimed at writing a document that the general public can understand, in limited cases we have aimed first at communicating effectively with expert writing teachers and writing-program administrators.

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 WAC to build on these outcomes.

**NIU'S Outcomes for English 103/203/204:**

**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

**3. Assessment Methods**

| Assessment Method | Explanation | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Description | Assessment-Level Target [a] | When Data Will be Collected | Person Responsible |
| Reading/scoring of ePortfolios from randomly selected FYComp students | An authentic programmatic assessment of the level of mastery at academic writing from both a holistic and an atomistic perspective. A scoring scale is used to assess the quality of the students' writing and reflection. Data collected is used to plan curricular and pedagogical changes, as well as professional development activities. | All ENGL 103 and students should be at the Progressing or Accomplishing levels. | Data is collected at the end of each semester in scoring sessions. | Director, Assistant Director, Technology Coordinator, and FYComp Committee. |
| Student Success Survey of all FYComp students who receive a D or F | A survey completed by all FYComp teachers, giving reasons for failure of every student who earns a D or F grade. Data is used for measuring the equity gap between groups of minority and white students. | Identify systemic reasons/causes for students who do not pass and provide data to inform intervention processes. | Each semester just after grades are reported. | Director, Assistant Director, Technology Coordinator. |

| Assessment Method | Explanation | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Description | Assessment-Level Target [a] | When Data Will be Collected | Person Responsible |
| Student Evaluation of Instruction | A survey of student satisfaction with instruction with both quantitative and qualitative responses. Data is used for yearly Instructor evaluations and frequent letters of recommendation for GTAs. | On a five-point scale, faculty should score 4.5. | Each semester, before finals week. | Director, Assistant Director, Office Support Specialist. |
| Teacher grading of student work | Teachers grade each essay and the final ePortfolio for each student. Grades are an indicator of student success. | Decrease the spread of GPA variability related to teachers. | At the end of each semester. | Classroom teachers. |
| Observations of instruction by professors and/or peers | Each first-year GTA is observed twice by ENGL 600 faculty; all first-year GTAs observe more advanced peers and write reports. | FYComp faculty will share activities and strategies with each other. | Faculty observation once a semester, peer observation two times a semester. | ENGL 600 faculty and students. |