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Brown & Robertson Seek WAC Grants

This year, the WAC Advisory Board and the Committee on the Improvement of Undergraduate Education recommended that WAC Grants be awarded to two outstanding proposals. $1,000 goes to Paula Brown in Management, and $3,000 goes to Julie Robertson, et al. in Nursing.

Professor Brown submitted a project on assessing improvement in student writing in her recently developed course, MGMT 333: Principles of Management. MGMT 333 emphasizes writing in business for non-majors. Brown will be looking closely at the impact of several factors on students’ increased proficiency: writing tips, assignments, directions, evaluation guides, use of the Writing Center, and student/professor conferences.

Brown will conduct statistical analyses of students’ self-reported use of different aids to better writing. She will also analyze students’ writing samples, comparing two semesters’ work.

Brown intends to shape her findings into a conference presentation to the American Society of Business and Behavioral Sciences, and she will also share her work with NIU faculty.

Professor Robertson and a subcommittee of faculty in the School of Nursing have already begun considering an ambitious revision of the Nursing Program’s portfolio assessment. Robertson and the subcommittee—consisting of Judith Hertz, Gayle Kruse, Lynn Mitchell, and Valerie Matthies—plan to collect student papers and assemble a collection of “pilot” portfolios for next year.

Robertson and the subcommittee will involve all of the Nursing faculty in the assessment project, so they can gather data on the assessment process, the results they find in student work, and the effectiveness of their assessment rubric. The project breaks new ground at NIU in many ways—e.g., it provides modest remuneration for faculty participation, it rewards the subcommittee’s extensive planning activities, it places the design of large-scale assessment in the hands of faculty themselves, and it tests the first model of its kind on campus.

Both Brown and Robertson consulted with the WAC coordinator before submitting their proposals. Congratulations to them both!

Writing Center Plans Summer Hours

Thanks to requests from students and faculty, the Writing Center in Reavis 306A will be open during summer session 2001.

Daytime hours will be from 8 AM to 5 PM, Monday through Thursday. Evening hours will be from 6 PM to 8 PM, Monday through Wednesday.

As during the regular academic year, professors can request Writing Center instructors to visit their classes. WC staff will tell students about how tutoring helps prepare better written assignments.

Faculty can also send assignments and course materials to the Writing Center files, to assure that tutors help students meet expectations.

Faculty should contact Gail Jacky for further information at 753-6636.
Telling Students About Our Grading Systems

Near the semester’s end, we might want to remind students about our grading systems.

- An “accumulated points” model assumes that good or poor work in one area offsets work in another area.
- A “definitional” model assumes that different categories of work are individually important, and performance in one area cannot compensate for performance in another.
- A “weighted averages” model assumes a combination of the above two.

Penalties or extra credit help make adjustments to these models.

- A “contract learning” model emphasizes student choice and responsibility, to accommodate students’ individual interests, needs, learning styles, backgrounds, etc.

It often helps to minimize projects, exams, or papers graded on a curve, because curves send the message that 1. good grades are a limited commodity determined by statistics; 2. competition is valued above collaborative or group learning; 3. learning is a demographic characteristic; 4. each class is a sample population that “fits” the demographic distribution; 5. grades are awarded by a formula, not by performance; and 6. standards will be lowered in event of poor performance by many.

What do we want students to understand about our grading systems? Do we take a developmental approach that rewards end achievements and reduces penalties for slow starts or early failures? Do we take a unit-based approach that is not cumulative and has no final exam or project that measures overall achievement? Do we allow for individual flexibility, choice, and participation in setting up criteria and expectations?

Once we’ve reviewed our grading systems, asking students to write a near-end self-evaluation enables them to recognize where they have excelled, where they have performed less well, and where they might invest their best, culminating efforts. A written self-assessment can also inform us of students’ achievements that we might have downplayed or not considered.

(Made from: Walvoord & Anderson, Effective Grading)

Making It Easier to Grade Papers

When you grade papers at the end of this semester, you might want to use this quick progression of steps toward assigning each grade:

1. Has the paper got a clear thesis?
2. Does the thesis take up a pertinent question or topic?
3. Does the paper avoid long quotations and summaries that remain unanalyzed or are “thrown in” without context?
4. Has the writer composed complete sentences?
5. Does the paper avoid basic grammatical errors?
6. How thoughtful and original is the paper?
7. How adequate is the thesis, the paper’s response to the thesis, the paper’s complexity and development?
8. How well is the paper organized in terms of sticking to the point, making transitions, providing an adequate conclusion?
9. How effective and appropriate is the style?
10. How well does the writer emulate the “voice” of proficient writers in your discipline?

If you answer no to one of these questions, the grade is probably a C. If you answer no to several of these questions, the grade is probably lower. Then consider the following:

The paper earns a B or an A, depending on answers to questions 6-10.

(Red from: John Bean, Engaging Ideas)

Rusin Addresses Writing Center Staff

This semester, when Professor David Rusin invited the Writing Center to visit his students in MATH 360: Model Building in Applied Mathematics, WC tutors turned around and invited him to visit them, too. Rusin spoke to 21 tutors in a staff meeting about how he expects students in math to define terms, explain processes, translate equations, interpret results, and provide conclusions. He acquainted WC staff with the assignments he distributes, along with samples of good mathematical essays.

The Writing Center encourages other professors to do the same, hoping to expand its “writing fellowship” between tutors and faculty who want their students to perform well.

Thanks to the Office of FDID!

The Office of Faculty Development and Instructional Design has helped tremendously with the WAC Program’s outreach to NIU faculty this semester by co-sponsoring three workshops.

This academic year, faculty attended: “Motivate Students to Revise through Effective Response,” “Faculty Roles in Writing Assessment” (with Deborah Holdstein and Bill Condon), and “Student Electronic Portfolios for Academic & Departmental Assessment” (with Michael Day, Kathy Fitch, Megan Hughes, Kenneth King, and Andrew Milson). The FDID hopes to go on recruiting NIU professors and guests from other campuses for WAC events. Kudos to this first-rate campus resource!