

## **Essential Learning & Assessment Review Committee Conclusions and Recommendations, 2012**

The Essential Learning & Assessment Review Committee (ELARC) reviews assessment data from across campus and uses the data to make recommendations to improve teaching, learning, and assessment at UW-Whitewater. The committee focuses on data related to student achievement of the UWW baccalaureate learning goals, currently defined as the LEAP essential learning outcomes (available at <http://www.uww.edu/acadaff/assessment/academic/wofiassess.html>) from the Association of American Colleges & Universities. The committee receives assessment summaries from the Colleges and other constituencies on campus and integrates the findings using the baccalaureate learning outcomes as the organizing framework. The ELARC recommendations presented here reflect attention to blending the curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular student experiences.

In the Fall of 2011, ELARC received and reviewed assessment summaries from:

- College of Arts & Communication
- College of Business & Economics
- College of Education & Professional Studies
- College of Letters & Sciences
- Office of Multicultural Affairs & Student Success
- Audit & Review
- Institutional Planning
- Writing Still Matters 2011 campus assessment project
- General Education Assessment Summit 2011

### **Conclusions:**

In Spring 2010, UW-Whitewater adopted the LEAP essential learning outcomes as the campus' definition of learning expected for all bachelors degree recipients. Departments, programs, colleges, and other units are in the early stages of integrating these learning outcomes into their systems for assessing student learning. At this point, our most informative areas of direct and indirect assessment relate to writing and critical thinking. An Open Pathways Project for the Higher Learning Commission will extend our data collection to additional learning outcomes.

### **Writing**

Evaluations of samples of student writing from the Writing Still Matters assessment project (2011) indicate that the quality and effectiveness of writing improves significantly from freshman to senior year. By senior year, however, only 50% of student writing meets the standards expected for graduating students. At the senior level, writing is stronger in the areas of focus, thesis, use of evidence, and documentation, and relatively weaker in analysis, interpretation, language use, and conventional grammar. Writing essay scores from the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP, administered 2009-2010) show that UWW seniors

scored significantly higher in writing than did freshmen, and both freshmen and seniors scored higher than the national average. UWW students come to college better prepared in writing than their national peers, and their writing skills improve significantly while they are here.

In 2010, UW-Whitewater participated in the Consortium for the Study of Writing in College (CSWC) as part of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Compared to CSWC peers, students at UWW reported that faculty engaged in significantly fewer best practices in teaching and writing including pre-writing activities, concept mapping and outlining, giving feedback on multiple drafts, and structuring peer review options. In addition, students believe that UWW faculty assigned more summary and description writing projects but fewer analytical writing or expository prose that integrates and synthesizes ideas and concepts; similarly, they paid less attention to teaching about the differences among discipline-specific discourses and audience awareness. Other practices students reported that UWW faculty engaged in less frequently include giving clear instructions concerning writing assignments, articulating learning objectives for these assignments, clarifying grading criteria and providing samples of successful writing (see the report of the General Education Assessment Summit, Team 2). This feedback from students suggests several ways that writing instruction can be improved at UW-Whitewater.

### Critical Thinking

Several measures of critical thinking show that juniors and seniors at UW-Whitewater score significantly higher than freshmen (for a review of data, see the report of the General Education Assessment Summit 2011, Team 1). By most measures, UWW students are similar to or above national norms or averages in critical thinking. Based on scores from the Critical-thinking Assessment Test (CAT), UWW students showed growth in the specific CT skills of evaluating information and providing alternative explanations, and applying information to real-world problems. Areas in most need of improvement included summarizing patterns of results, evaluating and interpreting correlations, and separating relevant from irrelevant information. Results from the CAAP (administered 2009-2010) show that UWW freshmen scored at the 44<sup>th</sup> percentile nationally in critical thinking and seniors scored at the 66<sup>th</sup> percentile—indicating that UWW seniors are performing the same as or better than a substantially larger percentage (66%) of their peers than are the freshmen (44%). On the NSSE, seniors at UWW report an overall higher degree of engagement in critical thinking in their courses than first year students report.

These data on writing and critical thinking are encouraging, and it would be important to explore the degree to which gains in these areas occur in individual programs across campus.

### The Open Pathways Project for the Higher Learning Commission

During 2012-2013, UW-Whitewater will participate in Cohort 3 of the Pathways Demonstration Project for the Higher Learning Commission. As part of our campus reaccreditation process, we will engage in an assessment project exploring writing, critical thinking, quantitative literacy, information literacy, broad/integrative knowledge, and specialized and applied learning outcomes in one academic department in each UWW college: Arts & Communication, Business & Economics, Education & Professional Studies, and Letters & Sciences. Direct assessment of these learning outcomes will occur at the associates, bachelors, and masters levels. Data collection will occur primarily during the Fall 2012 semester. Data will be analyzed and reported during spring and summer of 2013. Some outcomes will be measured using a campus-central “assessment center” model, while others will be measured locally in academic departments. This project should provide a good test of our assessment capabilities and help our campus enhance and better coordinate assessment efforts.

### **Recommendations:**

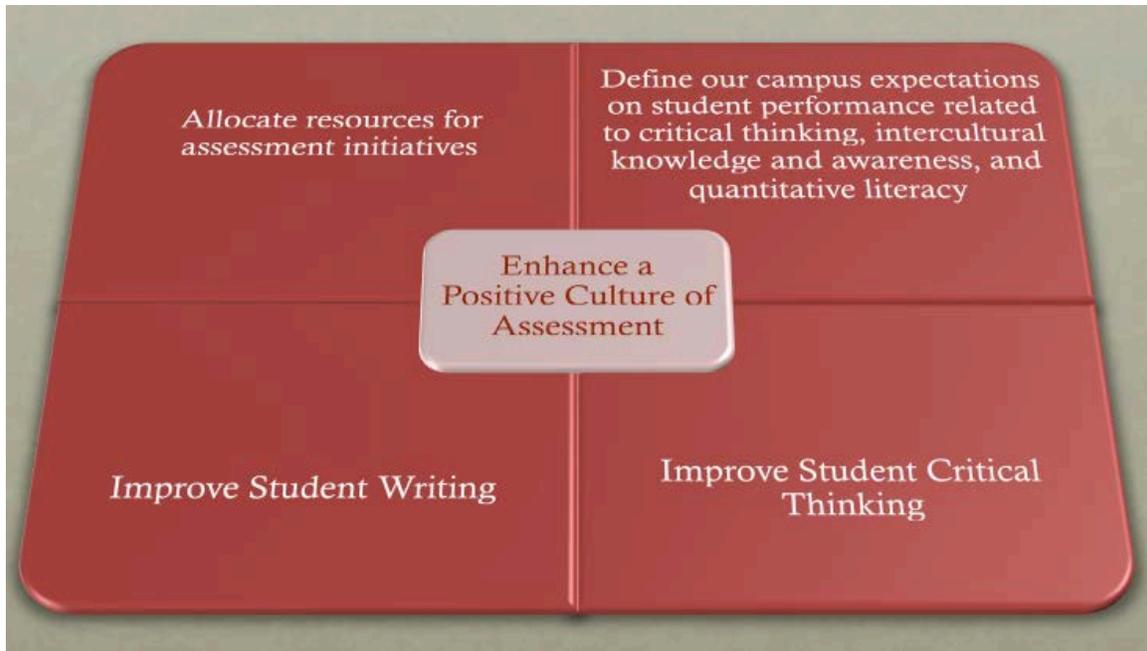
1. Assessment work is vital to our understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in all areas of student learning—curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular. To be most meaningful, assessment work should (a) be ongoing; (b) occur as an integral part of campus “life” (c) inform the institution’s approach to business; and, (d) require active engagement of faculty, staff, and students.. To **enhance a positive culture of assessment** that facilitates engagement, we recommend that:
  - a. The Faculty Senate, Academic Staff Assembly, and other appropriate governing bodies and administrators review and revise personnel policies (e.g., job descriptions and reward structures) to support faculty and staff engagement in assessment Administrators support the positive culture of assessment in their various addresses and interactions on campus.
  - b. The campus establishes an annual “Assessment Day” to recognize and share best practices and innovation in assessment.
  - c. Colleges, departments, and other units create ways to acknowledge and reward faculty, staff, and students for their work on assessment.
  
2. **Resources** are important for enhancing and sustaining our assessment capacity on campus. The Provost’s Office should collect feedback and suggestions about resource allocation for assessment, and work with colleges and other units to establish or revise budget lines and allocations for assessment work. We recommend that colleges/divisions and departments/units evaluate the resources they allocate or have available for assessment and work to determine the types and levels of resources they need to enhance their work.

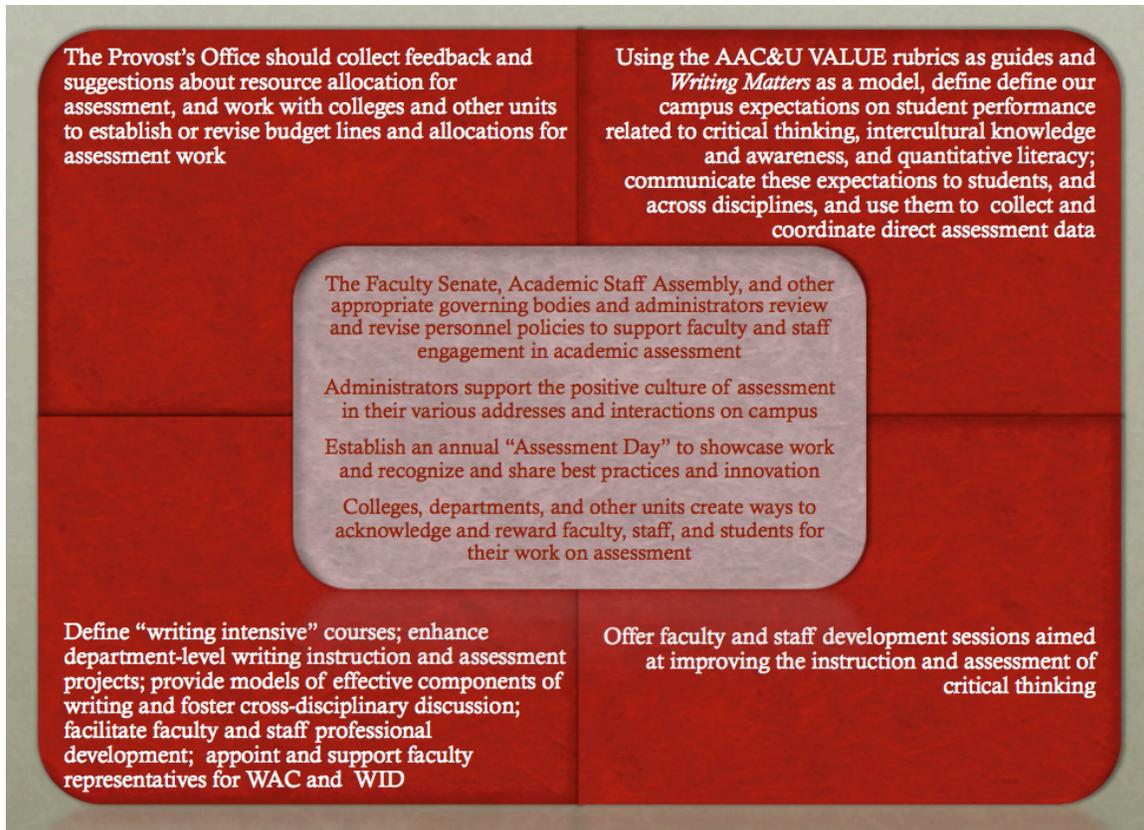
3. We agree with the recommendation of the General Education Assessment Summit 2011 that campus should develop rubrics that **define learning** and the progression of learning (e.g., from freshman to senior levels) for the essential learning outcomes of critical thinking, intercultural knowledge and awareness, and quantitative literacy. The AAC&U VALUE rubrics can be used as guides or starting points. Using Writing Matters as a model, these new rubrics can be used to (a) define our campus consensus about learning, (b) communicate our expectations to students across disciplines, and across the curriculum and co-curriculum, and (c) collect and coordinate direct assessment data.
4. Based on our review of data, and to **improve student writing**, the ELARC concurs with the recommendations from the Writing Still Matters 2011 assessment project to:
  - a. Define “writing intensive” courses at the college and university level.
  - b. Enhance department-level writing instruction and assessment projects.
  - c. Annotate the Writing Matters document to provide models of effective components of writing and to foster cross-disciplinary discussion.
  - d. Facilitate faculty and staff professional development to enhance writing instruction.
  - e. Appoint and support faculty and staff representatives for Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID).
  - f. Explore ways that all divisions—Academic Affairs, Administrative Affairs, and Student Affairs —may contribute to Writing Still Matters recommendations, particularly in relation to student employment, student organization participation, and unit-driven initiatives.
5. Based on our review of data, and to **improve critical thinking in students**, we recommend faculty and staff development sessions aimed at improving the instruction and assessment of critical thinking. Where appropriate, the focus should be on improving students’ skills in summarizing patterns of results, evaluating and interpreting correlations, and separating relevant from irrelevant information. This effort should take into consideration student curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular experiences.

The diagram below represents our recommendations in the form of a strategic assessment plan for 2012-2014.

It is our hope that all divisions and units on campus will participate and engage with this plan in ways that are meaningful to them.

## UW-Whitewater Strategic Assessment Plan, 2012-2014





ELARC Members (2011-2012):

Greg Cook (Chair)	Interim Director of Academic Assessment
John Stone	Interim AVC Academic Affairs, & Grad. Studies
Brent Bilodeau	Assistant Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs
Liz Hachten	Coordinator, General Education
Sally Vogl-Bauer	College of Arts & Communication
Melanie Agnew	College of Education and Professional Studies
Lois Smith	College of Business and Economics
Julie Letellier	College of Letters and Sciences
Barbara Bren	General Education Review Committee
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Paul Ambrose	University Assessment Committee
Denise Ehlen	Academic Staff Assembly
Samantha Casper	Whitewater Student Government
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