**Preliminary Report from the Sub-committee on Writing Intensive Courses**

**College of Letters and Sciences Curriculum Committee**

**April 2012**

1. **Background**

Since the campus has defined a set of common expectations for student writing performance and has conducted assessments that show that many students are falling short, how do we create a curriculum that ensures that students achieve an adequate level of competence before graduation?

The faculty and staff who participated in the Writing Still Matters 2011 assessment project recommended several steps that the university should take, including the need to define “writing intensive” courses and to enhance department-level writing instruction (see attached summary report).

This sub-committee (Ellen Davis, Angela Harlan, Paul House, Beth Olson, Trudi Witonsky, and Liz Hachten) was convened to begin the process of identifying ways that the College of Letters and Science can begin to implement these recommendations. The group collected information about current writing courses and requirements at UWW (see attached), and researched best practices at institutions across the state and nation. Our work is still ongoing but this document conveys our findings to date and tentative recommendations.

1. **What defines a writing intensive (WI) course?**

Based on our review of best practices on campus and at other institutions, there seems to be widespread agreement on the general elements of a writing intensive course:

* 1. Writing should be integral to the course. Course objectives should reflect the centrality of writing and assignments should be tied to content in a meaningful fashion.
  2. The instructor should provide explicit writing instruction, incorporating established best practices for writing across the curriculum (WAC) and writing in the discipline (WID). Instruction can take place in class as well as through individual or group conferences and written feedback on drafts and finished work. The instructor should intentionally structure assignments to build complexity and challenge over the semester.
     + Note: professional development will need to be offered to instructors in WI courses.
  3. The amount of writing should be substantial and sustained over the semester although the exact amount will vary depending on the discipline and genre(s) of writing emphasized in the course. In most fields, the normal expectation would be in the range of 3500 - 4000 words (12-16 pages) of formal, graded writing (excluding in-class exams but possibly including required drafts) produced by each individual student. However, in quantitative or technical fields, the total words/pages of formal grade writing may be less. Generally, there is an expectation of multiple substantive formal writing assignments over the course of a semester; if a single large writing project is required, it should be divided into stages.
  4. An emphasis on teaching writing as a process involving pre-writing, revision, editing, and proofreading, and an expectation that students follow that process. A WI course should incorporate required revision of at least one assignment or repetition of the same type of assignment so that students have an opportunity to use feedback to improve their performance. (As noted above, a required draft and revised version of a single assignment may count two separate assignments.)
  5. As appropriate, integrating informal or writing-to-learn activities (low or medium stakes) are encouraged.
  6. Assessment of student writing – writing assignments should make up a significant portion of the final grade in the course – normally at least 40%. Or require minimum level of achievement on writing assignments in order to pass the course.
  7. The enrollment caps should be appropriate to instructor workload in writing intensive courses and in no circumstances should go higher than 30. Assigning writing mentors to writing courses is one possible approach to lightening the instructor workload in such courses.

The sub-committee recommends that the college and university adopt these (or similar) guidelines for WI courses and develop a process for officially approving WI courses and designating them as such in the schedule of classes and catalog.

1. **How can departments enhance writing instruction and improve writing outcomes for students in their major programs?** 
   1. Provide professional development for all faculty and instructional staff to learn best practices for effectively incorporating formal and informal writing into their courses
   2. Increase the use of “writing to learn” activities that enhance students’ mastery of concepts and critical thinking skills in classes across the curriculum in a manner and quantity that does not substantially increase instructor workload. (Note that such activities can be incorporated into any sized class.)
   3. Ensure that departments are providing effective pathways for students to meet the university’s writing proficiency in the major requirement. See the attached document for the catalog statement of the university requirement and how departments currently require students to meet that requirement. Note that one weakness of the current university policy is that it lays out guidelines for how students should demonstrate writing proficiency in their major but says nothing explicitly about the department’s responsibility to provide adequate instruction and practice in disciplinary writing.
   4. The sub-committee has identified several possible pathways that better reflect current best practices in assuring that students develop competent disciplinary writing skills:

* Require one or more writing intensive major courses in order to assure that students master disciplinary writing. Intermediate or advanced-level courses are most appropriate because students should gain background in discipline before attempting the disciplinary conventions and genres.
* Require a writing intensive course outside the major in conjunction with additional instruction and practice in disciplinary writing (possibly through a WI course in the major or opportunities to refine writing skills in several required courses across the major)
* Create a “writing extensive” curriculum in which opportunities to learn/improve disciplinary writing are intentionally embedded across the major, evidence of student progress is collected, and the ultimate achievement of proficiency is documented. This writing extensive curriculum should meet or exceed the guidelines for a single WI course.