WAC Writing Survey 2012 Report

I. Introduction/ Rationale

In May of 2012, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program at Appalachian State University conducted its second survey of students in the Writing in the Discipline classes and in English 2001, Introduction to WAC, to get feedback pertaining to their attitudes about how well they are being prepared for writing in their majors, about their experience with the University Writing Center (UWC), and to find out how they felt about themselves as writers. WAC's main goal is to offer faculty development to support the vertical writing curriculum in order to help students write better while in college and to prepare them for the writing they will do outside academia. This survey can help WAC strengthen faculty development for the English 2001 course, students’ introduction to writing across the curriculum.

II. Methods

WAC consultant Dennis Bohr developed the original survey with help from the other WAC consultants; Georgia Rhoades, Director of WAC; Beth Carroll, Director of the UWC, and Rachel Strickland, Assistant Director of the UWC. The questions were essentially the same as the previous study with some changes:

- Question 7 (“Has English 2001 prepared you for writing in your major?”) was modified to a yes/no question, leaving out “somewhat” as a response;
- Question 9 explained the vertical writing model since students might know that they are required to have a dedicated writing course all four years of their college careers but might not know the term itself;
- Question 16 was added about whether people who had visited the University Writing Center would return;
- Questions 22, 23, and 24 were also added about portfolio use.

The IRB approved the changes, and the survey was sent to teachers of WID courses and English 2001 teachers, with a link for the students to access and complete the survey. The survey was voluntary and anonymous. Teachers were free to pass on the link to the survey while students had the option of taking the survey or not.

III. Results

There was an increase in the number of respondents to the survey over last semester’s survey. A total of 172 people clicked on the link to the survey, though the maximum number of people who responded to any one question was 157. Even so, this is an increase of 31 more people who took the survey over the Fall 2011 survey. Not surprisingly, most people who completed the survey were sophomores (60%), with 23 juniors, 22 seniors, 5 freshmen, 1 graduate student, and 3 transfer students. (See chart 1.) There were a total of 29 majors, with the heaviest concentration being
people training to be teachers. Fifty-two percent had taken English 1000 at ASU, and 71% had taken English 2001, with 11% from a WID course. (This last number may be slightly inaccurate since students may not be aware that their class is a WID course.)

Seventy-eight percent (108 out of 139 people) answered in the affirmative that writing is important in their major. This directly corresponds to the previous survey in which 79% responded yes to the question. Similar results were gained with the question “Has English 2001 prepared you for writing in your major?” with 92 of 132 respondents (70%) replying yes, compared to 76% on last semester’s survey. (See Chart 2.)
While the overall focus of this survey was about English 2001, one question was also asked about English 1000: “What was helpful about English 1000?” The top two responses, “Further practice with writing” (46%) and “Teacher feedback on papers” (43%) directly corresponded with the same question about English 2001 (57% and 50% respectively). Conferences with the teacher were also valued as important by students (32% in 1000, 43% in 2001) with class size being cited about English 1000 as well (34%). (Class size was inadvertently omitted from the English 2001 response choices.)

When comparing the surveys from 2011 and 2012 about what was helpful about English 2001, the numbers are also quite similar. Writing practice (52% in 2011 and
57% in 2012) and teacher feedback (50% in both) were the top two choices, as they were in last semester’s survey, and once again, the key elements that are emphasized in English 2001 showed heavy support as being important: citing sources (42%), using different documentation styles (40%), writing rhetorical analyses (40%), and gaining information about writing in the major (36%). Significant gains were shown in four other areas that are valued in all composition classes: developing voice (40%, up from 33%), peer feedback on papers (40%, up from 29%), conferences with the teacher (43% compared to 29%), and portfolio use (31% compared to 21%). (See chart 3.)

More students are aware of the vertical writing curriculum as part of their Gen Ed requirements. In Fall 2011, only 14.4% said they were familiar with the vertical writing model. However, the question was revised because while students might know that they were required to take a dedicated writing course each year of their college careers, they may not know the actual term, “vertical writing model.” The results show this to be true as 56% said yes to question 9, which now asks, “Are you aware that, as part of the new Gen Ed requirements, you are expected to take a third-year writing course and a capstone course in the major (referred to as the Vertical Writing Model)?”

Eighty-one percent of respondents see themselves as good writers, with organization (57%) being the top category cited for “What do you do well as a writer?” Fifty-two percent saw themselves as creative; 50% said they supply good detail; 47% argue well; and 46% said they are good at mechanics and punctuation and demonstrate a “clear, strong voice.” This suggests that students at ASU are confident about their writing ability.

Question 20, “What helps you as a writer?” offers an interesting contrast from last semester. Fall 2011’s survey suggested that teacher feedback (42%) and clear, specific instructions (22.88%) were the most helpful, and while these categories were the top two again, the percentages increased (85% and 65% respectively). Other aspects made significant increases over last semester’s survey as well: peer feedback jumped from 3.39% to 45%, conferences with the teacher increased from 16% to 56%, and examples of good papers rose from 11% to 56%. (See charts 4 and 5.)
Question 21—“What do you struggle with when writing?”—elicited the same top two responses on this semester’s survey as it did on the previous survey: “procrastination” (59% in 2011 and 2012) and “I have problems getting started and/or writing conclusions” (48% in both surveys). These two responses are closely related because students may procrastinate because they don’t know how to get started on a paper. The third highest response (“I don’t like to write”) may also relate to these answers because many student writers expect to be able to write a
paper in an hour or two. Process teachers emphasize that worrying about the first draft being perfect contributes to all three of these problems.

Three questions were added about portfolios to the new survey because process-writing teachers value portfolios, and the Composition program mandates their use in English 1000 and 2001. The 2011 survey indicated that students did not see the portfolio as being especially helpful in improving their writing, with only 17% saying the portfolio was helpful in 1000 and 21% in 2001. Most of the participants in the 2012 survey (90%) had created a portfolio at ASU, but 46% said that it did not help them improve as writers. The number one cited statement about portfolios was that students see the portfolio as “an extra assignment at the end of the semester” (44%). However, 43% said that portfolios allow “more time to polish a paper,” and 42% said they could improve their grades with portfolio use and that portfolios allow more time to revise thoughts. The somewhat contradictory answers may indicate that the question needs to be revised to get a more accurate picture of how students feel about portfolios. (See chart 6.)

Which of the statements do you agree with about portfolios?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allow me more time to revise thoughts</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow me to improve grades</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can choose which papers I want graded</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t like to revise</td>
<td>38%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I can showcase my work</td>
<td>39%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I prefer a grade on each paper</td>
<td>34%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I like seeing my progress across semester</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portfolios give me more time to polish a paper</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>chart 6</td>
<td>43%</td>
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IV. Conclusions

While this is still a relatively small sample of students, some conclusions can be drawn. WAC plans to emphasize the following points in discussions with faculty about ways to improve their students’ writing:

- Most students (78%) see writing as important to their majors.
- The majority (70%) see English 2001 as preparing them to write in their majors.
- There were increases in percentages regarding what was helpful about English 2001 in every category, but especially conferences with teachers (from 29% to 43%) and peer feedback (29% to 40%).
- Teacher feedback (85%) and clear, specific instructions (65%) were again the top two answers for what helps students as writers, followed closely by conferences with teachers (56%) and examples of good papers (56%). [These answers offer strong arguments for lowering class sizes in writing classes. Students value teacher feedback and conferences with professors, but the higher the numbers of students in a class, the less able teachers are to provide such assistance.]
- While more students know about the vertical writing curriculum, teachers still need to emphasize this in writing courses.
- More discussion of process writing and portfolios may improve students’ appreciation of writing as an important factor in their educations.

V. Action Plan

WAC will continue to implement this survey at the end of each semester, perhaps with modifications to be able to compare how sophomores, juniors and seniors view their writing experiences here at ASU. WAC also plans to administer a survey of WID teachers to gauge how they feel about their experience with teaching writing courses.

WAC will continue to help faculty and students be aware of the vertical writing curriculum and the value of process writing and portfolio pedagogy.