The Writing Skills Sub-Committee met at 2:00, April 2, 2015, in SA 4600A. Members present: Margaret Rustic (Chair), Sally Murphy (sitting in for Donna Wiley), Erik Helgren, Kaumudi Misra, Helen Ly, and Nancy Thompson

The Minutes from the last meeting will be emailed for approval.

Helen Ly/GWA: The meeting began with the introduction of Helen Ly, who will be seated on the WSSC. Helen is the SCAA Writing Center Coordinator. She provided an update of the ways in which the program will provide more robust support for writing. There will be more money to support Graduate Writing Associates (GWA) program, who will address writing not only in composition courses, but in other courses as well. Currently Helen is on a “listening tour” across campus, visiting departments and individual faculty members to find out what assignments are key in their disciplines, why they are key, and how they are related to writing expectations.

Policy for Approval of Graduate Courses to fulfill UWSR/Pilot programs. Graduate programs were asked if they wanted to participate. The Chancellor’s office focuses on assessment, but writing instruction is a related issue that was of concern to faculty, who wondered how much time would have to be spent in writing instruction. We are moving to separate assessment and instruction and to include discipline-specific abilities. Graduate programs were considered a good place to start, since enrollments are smaller and more ‘high stakes.” Graduate students who do not satisfy the UWSR can still take the WST or the first-tier and, if needed, second-tier courses.

The process of recording pass rates through the graduate courses has been difficult. It is not clear how accurately results are being recorded, and the data side is problematic. Resolving that issue will be important as we expand from the pilot program to writing across the curriculum. Erik suggested that verification of the USWR be part of the Department’s major check process. Sally noted that the issue is getting the information into Peoplesoft. Of the courses already approved, Public Administration withdrew and Business does not always report, though they continue to offer their course as an alternative.

Sally stated that the policy has to be specific, with rubrics included. Margaret proposed a review of syllabi to see, for example, opportunities for rewriting. Sally noted that GE has experienced similar concerns for quality control. Departments should specify how they will meet the desired competencies and approvals should be updated regularly, not granted permanently.

Erik stated that the WST is thesis driven and so is not necessarily appropriate for Physics. Sally responded that we could modify a model that would be discipline specific—e.g., for lab reports.

Margaret will send out rubrics for current writing portfolios. Would this be a way to respond to disciplinary requirements? It would be possible, as in the critical thinking requirement, to leave a blank line where faculty can add discipline-specific requirements to a root rubric. Margaret also noted that there had been a review of failing portfolios to see what problems occurred frequently.
GWAR in Semester Conversion

The second composition class will be an issue in the conversion to semesters and it is unlikely that a second comp requirement will survive. Margaret pointed out that students would have the option to take an upper-division writing intensive requirement, but there may be problems when a student changes majors or transfers from another university.

Draft: Policy for Approval of Graduate Courses to Fulfill the UWSR

Erik noted that the Policy has two grades, CR/NC for writing and a course grade for course requirements. The Policy states that, according to 14-15 CIC 12, a class approved to meet the UWSR should be offered in the last quarter. This sentence is most likely a mistake, as students should take the course early in their graduate careers. (14-15 CIC 12 states that students who have not met the WSR and have not made arrangements to do so by signing up for the WST or enrolling in a first- or second-tier writing course may not file to graduate.)

Discussion then centered on the review and renewal process for approved courses. The draft Policy suggests three years for the first renewal, then every five years after that. Margaret observed that following up on these courses by looking at a representative sample of passing and failing papers should be part of this committee’s responsibility.

Sally does not think review and renewal should be stretched out to five years. A first review of the course would look at the rubric with discipline-specific adjustments. A second review would look at samples of student writing.

Margaret wondered whether we could make approval of courses provisional, but Erik and Sally agreed that provisional approval would be problematic, as students need to know whether they passed as soon as they are done with a course. For the same reason it would be difficult to develop a year-long approval process. While we need to allow time for faculty to get up to speed, we cannot take away credit from students who legitimately thought they had met the requirement. Erik proposed a probationary year for the course, but students who take the course during the probationary period and pass should be considered to have met the UWSR.

Sally proposed a first renewal of a writing-intensive course at the end of year 1. Margaret replied that experience with the Business course showed that it was not enough to rely on the syllabus and rubrics submitted with a proposal; she agreed on setting the initial approval for a year.

Erik raised the question of alternatives for students who take an upper-division Writing Intensive course at 60 units, but who fail to pass. Margaret replied that we will continue to offer the WST and ENGL 3003 for students who do not pass.

Margaret will send out a revised document for review. Questions were also raised about recording the completion of the UWSR if, for instance there are two grades, the CR/NC for writing and the letter grade for course. Sally will meet with Glen Perry to see what is possible and to find out if a CR/NC writing score can easily be pulled out from a student’s record.
Erik also raised the issue of compensation for faculty for developing writing-intensive courses. Margaret will ask.

There is also the question of what happens when courses move out of the English department: who will control issues such as course cap? Sally commented that the provost has said that writing intensive courses might earn four units, with one unit for the writing part. These matters can be figured out at the department level. Margaret observed that the national standard is no more than a hundred students for writing-intensive courses. Conferencing takes time, so course caps are a workload issue, but we need not worry about implementation right now as we are developing a policy.

Margaret restated the consensus of the committee. We agree that more writing-intensive courses be proposed for undergraduates on the model of the pilot graduate courses. We cannot phase out the WST and other approved methods of meeting the UWSR.

The committee also discussed the possibility of introducing a diagnostic test to give students early warning of writing deficiencies. Margaret suggested that they could be administered through a writing specialist or on line. On-line diagnostic programs that take 45 minute or more already exist. Erik and Sally suggested the development of best practices that could include a diagnostic of some kind.

Sally proposed adding a W to course numbering for writing-intensive courses as is done in some other institutions. She would like to see more faculty development workshops to help colleagues develop effective writing assignments. Margaret added that she would like to see a full-time dedicated person to work on writing across the curriculum. Helen said that she can work with the Graduate Writing Associates, but not so easily with faculty.

Helen asked for information about how other campuses handle the Writing requirement. Margaret already has that information.

Erik would like to see a new flow chart that would include the option of a new upper-division writing-intensive course. Sally noted that by semester conversion, that we should know how many writing courses will be available. These should not be senior writing courses. Students should take them in their junior year.

We also need to figure out how to ensure juniors take the writing courses. Eric suggested that figuring that out could be part of the approval process for proposed writing-intensive courses.

The meeting of the committee adjourned at 3.45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Nancy Thompson