Writing Skills Subcommittee

Minutes November 4, 2015

The meeting was called to order at 2:00 p.m.

Members present: Lan Wang (CBE), Helen Ly (SCAA), Donna Wiley (APGS/representing Testing Office), Nancy Thompson (CLASS/CIC), Margaret Rustick (Director of Composition) Ryan Smith (COS) was present for the first part of the meeting, but had to leave early.

Margaret began with the background of the GWAR (Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement) and the intent behind the creation of the Writing Skills subcommittee and described the way students can meet the Writing Skills requirement. A major concern now is that juniors don’t take the WST, but postpone it until they are approaching graduation.

GWAR-certified courses: Last year this committee proposed the creation of GWAR-certified courses in the disciplines that could be used as an alternative to the WST to assess student writing. A memo describing this proposal was sent to CIC. Margaret noted that the proposal generated some confusion at CIC, and that she had attended meetings of CIC and the GE subcommittee to explain further.

Margaret also expressed concern about allowing a single member of the faculty to decide on whether students have met the Writing Skills Requirement in a GWAR-certified course. She suggested adding an outside reader to do portfolio assessment. Donna objected to portfolio assessment because of the manpower and expense it would require. Margaret responded that the assessment process could be carried out more efficiently and quickly. Nancy proposed having the instructor determine clear competence; less proficient students could take the WST or start the sequence of writing courses. Helen suggested training for instructors to determine what constitutes Limited Competence or Developing Competence. Nancy suggested a pilot program, as only a limited number of departments are likely to propose GWAR-certified courses.

The discussion turned to how other universities are handling writing assessment. Helen asked about Washington State. Margaret replied that students there submit two essays and do a timed writing assignment, and all three pieces of writing are assessed. Lan asked whether graduate students could assess writing samples. Margaret stated that she thinks it is better to use faculty drawn from various discipline.

The Committee agreed that we should look at the way other CSUs are dealing with the GWAR. Margaret is on a list of CSU directors of composition and will ask for information on the following points:

Do other CSUs require portfolios, and if so, how are they read?
If discipline courses are used to satisfy the GWAR, is the course grade distinguished from the writing assessment—i.e., can a student pass the course but not satisfy the GWAR?

Are discipline courses used to assess writing competence or are they intended to satisfy the requirement?

Which CSUs use a test only? Which use a test and/or a course? Which use a course only?

We need an improved flow chart that includes the proposed GWAR-certified courses.

Margaret asked whether we should push for GWAR-certified courses now in the middle of semester conversion? Nancy expressed her opinion that a proposal should be completed as quickly as possible, as departments may wish to include GWAR-certified courses as part of their program revisions.

Second-tier courses: The committee discussed ways to encourage more second-tier courses. In recent years budgetary pressures kept the number of courses down: departments did not want to offer courses capped at thirty students. Margaret provided a cover sheet listing the requirements for a second-tier course. The committee agreed that some clarification and revision of the cover sheet is needed. Margaret volunteered to edit it and circulate it by email. We will decide on a final version at our next meeting.

Margaret suggested that we develop an informational handout to help faculty thinking about developing to upper- and lower-division writing classes.

Committee Chair and Secretary: The committee decided by consensus that Margaret will continue as chair and that Nancy will continue as secretary.

The meeting adjourned at 3:35.

Respectfully submitted,

Nancy Thompson

Note: Since November 11 is Veterans Day, the next meeting will be November 18, 2015, from 2:00-3:30 p.m. We will meet in SA