

**Academic Leadership for Assessing Student Learning:
Moving Your Campus Forward
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The Writing Intensive Course Initiative

From 2006 to 2008 Bard was a member of a Teagle Foundation funded eight-school consortium (Allegheny, Hamilton, Hampshire, Hobart William Smith, Hope, Vassar, and Wabash) working jointly on assessment projects. Steven Weisler of Hampshire College led the consortium. In particular, Bard participated in a comparative assessment of student writing. Student writing samples from the end of the senior year of high school, the end of the first year of college, and the senior year of college were collected from the campuses participating in this assessment. In late May of 2007 faculty readers from Bard, Hampshire, and Vassar, gathered at Vassar College for a two day reading. Within each year, each reader read papers from every institution except his or her own. Papers were coded so that the reader did not know either the institution or level of the student author. After going through a thorough norming session, readers scored each paper using a rubric developed by Hamilton College. The rubric has eight dimensions and uses a 7-point scale.

Carol Trosset of Hampshire College did an extensive analysis of the data from the reading. This analysis showed that student writing at Bard, on average, improves significantly between high school and the first year of college and between the first year of college and the senior year of college. However, there was a significant minority of students for which writing improvement was minimal. This fit well with the concerns of a small group of faculty that had been discussing the quality of writing in senior projects (a year-long project required of all Bard seniors). Our Director of College Writing (DCW) Philip Pardi discussed the data from the Teagle consortium with this group of faculty during fall 2007. Seeing the comparative data (masked) from the other institutions as well as the local Bard data promoted a fruitful series of discussions.

The result of these discussions was the realization that Bard students experience highly structured encounters with writing at three junctures: during L&T in the summer before their first year, during First Year Seminar, and during senior year when writing a senior project. However, during the sophomore and junior years students had no structured encounters with writing. This could very well be where the significant minority of students that show little improvement is “lost”. To improve the writing of all students, the faculty group, led by our DCW, decided to create opportunities for students to have structured encounters with writing during their middle years. For spring 2008 five writing intensive (W-I) courses were piloted in the fields of economics, history, Spanish, philosophy, and classics. Each class met for an additional hour per week so as to allow for serious classroom

time devoted to writing. Our DCW worked with the five faculty members to establish a model for these courses.

We are currently moving into our fourth semester of offering designated W-I courses. In the first three semesters, 15 faculty members have taught a W-I course. When a faculty member teaches a W-I course for the first time they receive a stipend and they participate in a three-day workshop developed by our DCW. The workshop introduces faculty to a collection of proven tools and practices that help ensure that students emerge from the semester as stronger, more self-aware writers. In each writing-intensive class, we ask the professor to collect the following: (1) a mid-term reflection from each student, in which they discuss what they have learned and how they have improved thus far, and laying out goals for the rest of the semester; (2) an end-of-semester reflection that discusses their progress as writers in general, outlining both improvement and areas still needing improvement; and (3) a portfolio of 3 or more pieces, selected from the semester, that support the claims made in the end-of-semester reflection, showing areas of growth and areas still needing work. We also ask that each professor write a short reflection on the experience, discussing his or her perspective on how the experience went in terms of teaching the class generally and teaching writing specifically. Many of these are especially moving, as they speak to the ability of faculty to do what they always wanted to do but never could without the W-I setting. Indeed, one of the most promising developments of the W-I initiative has been the development of a course model that blends content and writing in a much more effective and efficient way for faculty.

Two programs, Biology and Philosophy, are moving forward with plans to require a W-I course for their major and our Curriculum Committee will discuss formalizing the W-I initiative this spring. Assuming a positive outcome of these discussions, our next institutional challenge will be to develop an assessment protocol for the Writing Intensive Course Initiative.