

Writing-Intensive Focus Board

Thomas Hilgers, Chair, Fall 2006

Todd Sammons, Chair, Spring 2007

REPORT FOR ACADEMIC YEAR 2006-2007

The 2006-2007 Writing (W) Focus Board membership included Andrew Crislip, Thomas Hilgers (on sabbatical Spring 2007 and replaced by Todd Sammons), Jane Kadohiro, Mike Kirk-Kuwaye, Bruce Liebert (resigned as of Spring 2007 and replaced by Weilin Qu), Puakea Nogelmeier, Eldon Wegner, Leslie Wilson, Graham Crookes (*ex officio*; replaced Spring 2007 by Kenton Harsch), and Jim Henry (*ex officio*). The General Education Committee liaison was John Engel. Staff services were again provided by the Mānoa Writing Program/General Education Office (MWP/GEO).

Policies and Hallmarks

- (a) The General Education Committee (GEC) accepted the following policy change involving W designations [rationale in brackets]: all Boards, including the W Focus Board, are delegated the authority to designate courses that have one or two Focus designations [streamlines approval process]; new W approvals will continue to be valid for three years; renewal W approvals, however, will be valid for five years [faculty appreciate less frequent need for applications; because W is a mature Focus requirement, we don't need to keep reminding faculty of the hallmarks—hence a longer period between renewals is reasonable; Boards can devote more time to professional development].
- (b) The W Focus Board decided that “topics” courses will be ineligible for a course-based W designation (“topics” courses are usually proposed by individual faculty members because content varies).
- (c) No changes to any W Hallmarks were made.
- (d) The Board did begin discussion of a potential problem with Hallmark #4: “The course requires students to do a substantial amount of writing—a minimum of 4,000 words, or about 16 pages.” The first explanatory note refers to the possibility of instructors assigning both “formal and informal writing”; the fourth explanatory note assays a definition of the two types: formal writing is revised; informal writing is “not revised.” Some W Focus Board members were uneasy about the possibility that all (or most) of the writing done for a class with a W designation could be informal. It was noted that UH-West O‘ahu requires that half of the writing for a course with a W designation be formal writing.

Proposal Review

- (a) As of May 2007, 334 proposals were approved, 3 were pending, 2 were denied, and 3 were withdrawn, for a total of 342 proposals considered by the Board in AY 2007. (Note

that proposals considered in AY 2007 were for sections offered in the 2007 calendar year.)

- (b) Because each individual Board member deals with a certain number of departments (and therefore with a certain number of proposals), we do not have the data regarding the number of proposals that required follow-up with their authors. Discussions at Board meetings suggest that no more than 10% of the proposals necessitate follow-up by Board members. About 1.5% of the courses proposed this year did not gain a W designation.
- (c) The W Board decided to institute the following procedure for considering course-based proposals. The initial review will be conducted by the Board member responsible for the department from which the proposal came. But, rather than simply accept that Board member's recommendation (which is what we do with instructor-based designations), we decided to have the entire Board consider each course-based proposal, relying heavily on the report and recommendation of the Board member who did the initial review. Consensus is that this seems to be working, although the Board felt it was crucial for each course to have clear minimum standards that explain how the course will meet the W Hallmarks. The Board also noted that departments were sometimes having difficulty revising catalog descriptions to indicate the writing-intensive nature of the courses being proposed for course-based designations. The Board hopes to have mitigated this problem by having posted examples of successful catalog language for these courses on the GenEd website. We also will add language to the effect that the catalog descriptions for these courses should refer to "instruction in writing" rather than simply to "a significant amount of writing." New language that stresses the importance of interaction between student and teacher in W courses will also be added.
- (d) MWP/GEO instituted this year a new procedure that automatically designates approved sections each semester that they are offered, without requiring the department's input. (The old procedure was to send each department a list of approved courses+instructors. The department then sent the list back, indicating which instructors were teaching their approved W courses.) The new procedure seems to be working, except when (i) instructors with multiple Focus approvals do not want to offer their course(s) with all their approvals; and/or (ii) class size issues dictate that not all sections are capped at 20, even if they are taught by the same instructor. In instances such as these, it is the responsibility of the department and/or the instructor to notify MWP/GEO so that the designations(s) will not be added.
- (e) Column 2 of the W proposal chart was changed to read "Number of pages required of *each student*." This change was made because of a problem Board members were having with group writing: it was frequently unclear as to how much writing each individual student was asked to contribute to a group project.

Current Status of Offerings

In Fall 2006 and Spring 2007, 879 W classes were offered and 14,208 student seats were filled. W classes were, on average, 88% full. Average section enrollment was 17 students in Fall 2006 and 16 in Spring 2007.

Faculty Development

Four W Focus workshops were held in conjunction with the Center for Teaching Excellence, two in the fall (on plagiarism and on writing in the disciplines) and two in the spring (teaching with writing and giving effective feedback).

The Board's networking and recruitment efforts seem to be working, in the main, although it is still the case that not all departments are offering enough upper-division W classes to service all of their majors. The material on the Mānoa Writing Program website is extensive and, from all indications, helpful—at least when colleagues access it.

The MWP/GEO staff set up yet another successful meeting of the Systemwide Committee on Written Communication, April 27, 2007. All ten campuses were represented. All ten campuses had their W articulation agreements with each other renewed for the coming academic year. Not everyone traveled to the UH Mānoa campus; some campuses were “present” via a polycom linkage.

Assessment

- (a) No changes to the end-of-course survey form itself were made; but, in an attempt to get a better return rate, W instructors were emailed and told that hard copies of the questionnaire were available upon request. In addition, hard copies were sent to W instructors who were offering their courses with multiple Focus areas. As in previous years, instructors were told about the CAFÉ questions that related to W goals. Survey results were in line with those of previous years. A summary is posted at www.hawaii.edu/gened.
- (b) We also began thinking about ways of administering our survey online (e.g., via “Survey Monkey”).
- (c) We're not sure how to go about determining “how effective the Hallmarks are in designating courses that meet the spirit of the W Focus.” Sammons reports, however, that he did not have a single complaint from a student about a W Focus course during the spring semester.

Current Concerns and Issues

Teaching Assistants. Besides the concern expressed above about giving W designations to courses that have too much informal writing, the Board decided that, in order to alleviate concerns about courses in which writing instruction is delegated to Teaching Assistants (TAs), we would put information on our website to which instructors of courses with TAs could be referred.

Plagiarism. The Board also discussed plagiarism, specifically, what can the W Focus Board do to minimize it? Some ideas: putting information up on the MWP website; putting information on plagiarism in the W Focus brochure that we give instructors for students every semester; more workshops.

Over-enrolled sections. We are concerned about the (admittedly small in number) faculty who overenroll their W classes. To date, all we have done is send various levels of admonitory letters;

we have never rescinded an instructor's approval because of chronic overenrolling. One idea to explore: can we set a cap on W courses that not even the instructors can exceed?

Threshold for the collection option. We may wish to reconsider the SAT and ACT threshold scores for the collection. Currently, students who score 680 or above on both the Writing and Critical Reading portions of the SAT (or 30 or higher on the English/Writing and Reading sections of the ACT) are invited to submit collections of their writing for possible credit for English 100(A) or ELI 100. But should we not allow this option to a student who scores very high on one part (say 750) and just below the cutoff (say 660) on the other?

MWP resources. The Board noted that, during the past few years when the GEO was added to the responsibilities of the MWP, attention paid to MWP has necessarily lessened. As the GEO matures, it may be time to return some resources to MWP. So we are disappointed that a \$10,000 line item for GEO professional development (the W Focus Board would get some of this money) was not funded in the latest round of the Supplemental Budget. Nor is it scheduled to be a top-tier priority in the next round.

Future Priorities and Goals

The Board members felt these would improve the program:

- Beginning-of-the-year orientation for department chairs;
- Orientation for new department chairs and new secretaries (currently, an orientation is offered each semester for secretaries, coordinators, and other interested faculty/staff members);
- Focus group or brown-bag sessions in which experienced chairs and secretaries communicate issues and problems to MWP; and
- A 20th year anniversary celebration of the UHM writing across the curriculum program in 2008.