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Portfolio Assessment of Student Writing at the Rising-Junior Level

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Freshman/Sophomore and Junior/Senior Writing Studies
Interdisciplinary Writing Program

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"He's taken nine courses, but he wrote in only one in his very first quarter here. My feeling is--put pencil to paper. Any kind of writing is better than none. I'd say students have to write in every course."

**--comment from a faculty participant
in a Portfolio Assessment Workshop**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents results of three portfolio assessment workshops that were designed to evaluate UW student writing at the rising-junior level. Seventeen faculty members from a wide range of disciplines and two administrators participated in the workshops. Faculty participants were asked to evaluate the writing portfolios of eight students (seven in the first workshop). Portfolios contained all the papers the students had written during their freshman year for the first workshop and during both freshman and sophomore years for the second two workshops. In addition, portfolios included course lists and reflective essays the students wrote, one at the end of the freshman and one at the end of the sophomore year, in which they selected their best and worst papers (and the one that they learned the most from writing if it differed from their best and worst) and explained their choices.

After they had completed four written tasks with the eight portfolios, faculty met for day-long workshops to discuss their evaluations. Two distinct assessment models seemed to be in play at all workshops: a "two gate" model, in which papers were evaluated first for their correct mechanics and second, for the quality of students' thinking, and a more holistic model, which did not separate mechanics from thinking. However, regardless of which model faculty members embraced, neither group followed the model closely in evaluating the students' portfolios. Instead, the two criteria that faculty evaluators employed most often were signs of improvement and students' own evaluations of their work in the reflective essays. Both criteria presented problems that faculty members recognized and discussed.

Regarding students' writing proficiency at the rising-junior level, faculty members at the three portfolio assessment workshops seemed to feel that, in general, students' writing was weak. However, because of disagreement among faculty members about individual's portfolios and because of inconsistencies between faculty assessment and assessment by grades, it was difficult to draw clear conclusions about individual students' portfolios. Faculty members discussed seven possible reasons for overall weakness in student writing performance:

- some students do not write enough
- students do not receive enough instruction in writing when they are given writing assignments; they are not taught how specific disciplines make arguments
- assignments are sometimes poorly designed and expectations are too low
- little can be transferred from the writing assigned in freshman composition courses to writing demands in other courses
- students are not taught to read and reread before they begin writing
- students are not taught to do research
- students are not given enough useful feedback on their writing.

Regarding other benefits of portfolio assessment, all three workshops provided convincing evidence that evaluating students' portfolios--the record of their accrued experience--can be a powerful tool for faculty development and a catalyst for improved undergraduate education. The longitudinal view provided by such workshops was very different from the cross-sectional view that faculty members get by reading student papers assigned in their own courses. The longitudinal view provided faculty members with new information, including the following:

- a clear sense of the ways particular contexts shape student writing

- a new awareness of the range and variety of writing demands to which students must respond
- a close look at the UW's general education curriculum
- insight into their own course requirements and ideas for change
- an appreciation for the value of student self-assessment

The information gained by the 17 faculty members at the three workshops has the potential to improve the writing experience of thousands of undergraduate students. Indeed, several of the faculty participants have told us about changes they made in their courses that were informed by these workshops. Therefore, we recommend that the UW continue to collect and maintain a sample of student writing portfolios and that the UW use these portfolios to evaluate its own performance and its students' writing proficiency as part of its ongoing assessment plan.

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One of the aims of both the Freshman/Sophomore and the Junior/Senior Writing Studies was to examine the feasibility of two methods for evaluating student writing proficiency at the rising junior level. The first method--collecting and evaluating writing samples--gave us little useful information about students' writing proficiency, although we did discover some reasons for why this method often yields unsatisfying results. We have discussed our results regarding controlled writing samples in our 1991 report on the Freshman/Sophomore Writing Study.

The second method we examined--portfolio assessment--proved more promising. The portfolio assessment process did give us some new information on students' writing proficiency, but, more important, it turned out to be a powerful faculty development tool with the potential to transform the writing experience of thousands of undergraduates on campus.

The purpose of this document is to report results of the portfolio assessment process and to provide recommendations regarding portfolio assessment based on those results. The report contains five sections. First we discuss our methodology. Then we discuss issues that arose regarding faculty criteria for evaluating students' portfolios. Third, we provide portfolio assessment results regarding students' writing proficiency. Next, we discuss portfolio assessment workshops as a tool for faculty development. Finally, we make recommendations based on our findings.

METHOD

Three portfolio assessment workshops were held between 1991 and 1993, and the same basic procedure was used for all three. We invited six faculty members from different disciplines to participate in the first two and five faculty members and one administrator to participate in the third. We asked faculty from a wide range of disciplines to become involved for two reasons: First, we believe that writing practices and conventions are discipline-specific; therefore, no single discipline can determine what good writing is. Second, students' portfolios contained writing from a wide range of disciplines, so it seemed important to have our assessors reflect the same diversity. Since we were adding between 20-40 hours of work to faculty members' jobs, we paid them for their participation.

Faculty were given the writing portfolios of eight students (seven in the first assessment process), so the same portfolios were used in all three sessions. Six of the eight were randomly selected from our files; two were selected because their portfolios raised issues we felt faculty might profit from discussing. The two we selected were the portfolios of a non-native speaker and of an honors student. Portfolios for the first assessment workshop contained papers only from the freshman year; portfolios for the second and third workshops contained papers for both the freshman and sophomore years. Papers had been retyped so that faculty comments and grades did not appear on them.

In addition to the papers students had written, portfolios contained a list of the courses students had taken. The lists of the courses taken by the eight students whose portfolios were reviewed,

as well as the writing assigned in those courses, are included as Appendix A. Portfolios also contained two reflective essays students had written—one at the end of the freshman year and one at the end of the sophomore year. In these essays, students were asked to review their papers; to select their best, worst, and the one that they had learned the most from writing, if that differed from the first two choices; and to write a five-page essay that explained their rationale for those choices.

Faculty participants were given students' portfolios about a month before the portfolio assessment workshop and were asked to complete the following five tasks with them:

- write comments about each portfolio
- develop criteria (for the first workshop) or use criteria that we had given them (for the second two workshops) to rate each portfolio as passing or failing (see Appendix B for criteria sheet)
- rank the portfolios from best to worst
- list any problems that they had in completing the assessment process
- attend a day-long workshop to discuss their assessment of the portfolios

The portfolio assessment workshops followed a six-step pattern. After brief opening comments, we asked faculty for their pass/fail ratings and their rankings of the portfolios. We used these to put together a composite, so faculty participants could see where agreement and disagreement about the portfolios were the most pronounced. Second, we discussed the problems faculty members had encountered as they worked to assess the students' portfolios. Third, we discussed each portfolio individually; these discussions took up the largest portion of workshop time.

After detailed discussion of the portfolios, we asked faculty members to rate and rank them again, so that we could see if the discussion had changed anyone's assessment. Fifth, we gave faculty members a list of students' grades, including the grades for the papers in the portfolios, the grades students received in the courses requiring papers, and students' overall GPAs.

Finally, we took some time to discuss what faculty members had learned about the undergraduate curriculum, the writing demands students were asked to meet, and their own teaching. While we focused this discussion at the end of the workshop, it had, in fact, been going on throughout the day.

CRITERIA ISSUES

The use of criteria to assess student writing was confounded at all three workshops, whether faculty members developed their own set of criteria or used ours (Appendix B). Two distinct assessment models seemed to be in play in some degree at all three workshops—the "two-gate" model and a more holistic model; however, neither model was employed consistently. Faculty members appeared to rely most heavily on improvement and on students' self-assessment in deciding whether to pass or fail students' portfolios.

"Two-Gate" vs. Holistic Criteria

In the first workshop—the one where faculty members developed and reported their own criteria—we could identify criteria faculty members said they used with two distinct assessment models: the "two-gate" model or a holistic model. These two models seemed to prevail in the second two workshops as well, regardless of the fact that we had provided faculty members with criteria.

Faculty members who used the two-gate approach first read for mechanics and then read for the quality of the student's thinking or argument. In the first workshop, one faculty member characterized this approach in this way:

First, can the student write a simple sentence, spell, use grammar, convey simple ideas. Second, [I look at] the flow, the thesis, quality and so on. These come only after the first set of questions get answered.

This same faculty member commented that "about 75 percent of freshmen do not pass the first [set of questions]."

Faculty members who used a more holistic approach did not separate students' writing mechanics from their thinking. Holistic evaluators tended to focus immediately on the quality of the student's writing and on whether students fulfilled the purposes set for them by assignments and by their own thesis statements. Holistic evaluators, therefore, asked different questions about the student papers they read: "Did I find [this paper] worth reading?" "Was there a unity of purpose to the writing?" "I thought the student could think pretty well."

An example of an interchange between these two kinds of evaluators illustrates the difference between them:

"She's too enamored with prepositions. One sentence has nine prepositions in it."

"But what she wanted to say is interesting."

There are many arguments in the literature on composition and rhetoric that provide strong evidence against using a "two-gate" approach to evaluating student writing. One problem, for example, is that as writing assignments become more complex, students make more mechanical errors than they do when writing demands are simple and familiar (Richard Haswell, "Error and Change in Student Writing," *Written Communication*, October 1988). Therefore, use of the two-gate model could lead evaluators to value clean responses to easy assignments that asked students to repeat the kinds of writing they had done extensively in high school, rather than value less perfect responses to assignments that demanded new ways of thinking.

However, regardless of whether faculty members believed in a two-gate or holistic approach to evaluating writing, neither group followed its stated criteria when determining whether students' portfolios should pass or fail. Nor did they follow the criteria we gave them. Instead, faculty members' ratings of students in all three workshops seemed to depend on two unstated criteria: improvement and students' self-assessment as expressed in their reflective essays.

Improvement

One problem with the first criterion faculty members imposed on the set we provided--improvement--is that it is difficult to measure. Yet, like pornography, faculty members felt that they "knew improvement when they saw it," and their discussion of portfolios did, in fact, demonstrate some agreement on whether improvement had occurred or not.

However, faculty members challenged their own assumptions about improvement at all three workshops. They argued that even if they could agree as a group that improvement was evident in the work of one student or another, they could not be sure why it had occurred. They expressed concern that they might not be measuring students' improvement in writing proficiency, but, rather, measuring factors that lay outside students' control. Three such factors were suggested.

First, they argued that when they saw "improvement," they might really be seeing signs that a particular writer had finally met with a writing task that fit both his interests and his own analytical approach to problems. For example, a student who did not write clear, well-argued literary analyses, wrote two very competent analyses for an architecture course a few months later. Faculty members wondered if that shift had to do with the student's improvement in writing proficiency or with the student finding a subject and a set of writing conventions that fit better with his way of thinking and his interests.

A second problem with improvement as a criterion is the impossibility of taking into account the varying levels of clarity and difficulty among the writing assignments to which students had to respond. At all three workshops, faculty members noted that when paper topics were clear, complex, and demanding, students' writing was better than when assignments were easy or vague. Vague assignments produced bad papers, even when students who had written strong papers for harder but better defined assignments were writing them. The following interchange among three faculty members at the first assessment workshop illustrates the difficulty of separating an evaluation of the assignment from an evaluation of the student's writing:

"I gave the portfolio a borderline pass, because I didn't know what she was getting at. The engineering statement is tautological. But it is not surprising to get something back like that, considering the assignment."

"Both assignments are weak. An article summary--so what?"

"Bob's comment is very insightful. It would be interesting to see [what kind of] writing she will be doing in the future."

A second interchange provides another example:

"The paper on power was terrible."

"But that was a horrible assignment and [the paper] had to be judged against that."

Also, while it was not always true, paper topics tended to become more difficult as students took higher-level courses. Therefore, students often appeared to be improving simply because they were responding to meatier assignments, that is because faculty expected more of them. More will be said about how assignment design figured into the assessment of student writing proficiency in the Faculty Development section of this report.

The third and final problem with improvement as a criterion involves separating students' writing proficiency from the varying levels of writing assistance students were offered in their courses. Faculty members at all three workshops agreed that they were not sure whether they were evaluating improvement in students' writing or improvement in the quality of the writing instruction students' received. One faculty member referred to this distinction in his comments on assessing lab reports for a chemistry course:

...I couldn't judge these very much. Lab reports are very dependent on the TA and on what the TA told them....Some want to know what students are *thinking* and others just want to know what the students *did*.

Comments from three faculty members at other workshops further illustrate this problem:

"There are so many cases where I didn't feel I had enough context to judge [these papers]. A lot depends on what the teacher did in setting up the assignment, and it's hard to hold that against students."

"It would be interesting to know what other students' sense of the quality of instruction in these classes was."

"I wish we'd had more insight into the classroom context in which the writing occurred. Also, I would have liked to know what assignments happened along the way [to these paper topics]."

Students' Self-Assessment

At all three workshops, faculty members referred to students' reflective essays to demonstrate that students did or did not understand problems in their own writing. They recognized that the reflective essays often illustrated that students' understanding of what they need to do—use evidence in a history paper, for example—precedes their actual ability to do it. In addition, often such understanding occurs at the end of a course, when students no longer have opportunities to demonstrate their new understanding.

Faculty members referred directly to reflective essays when they discussed their rankings of portfolios, as the following examples illustrate:

"I ranked her higher than most. Her criticism of her worst paper was good; it showed awareness."

"There's so little [assigned] writing [in this portfolio] to go on. The reflective essay were good. This person would probably be capable of handling whatever was set before him."

"This second reflective essay shows that the student has learned the terms for some things. He's the general university student...."

"I liked the reflective essay a lot. Lots of syntactic complexity here. Also—clarity. The line of argument in the reflective essay shows a mind at work; there's an argument and evidence of countering, too. That shows thinking."

"Her diagnosis of that first SIS 202 paper is brilliant—remarkably sophisticated."

Like the faculty assessors attending our workshops, we, too, believe that a great deal can be learned from students' reflections on their own writing, and that any attempt to assess students' performance must also take students' assessment of their own performance into account. While it may be true, as one faculty member feared that we cannot tell "how much of the reflective essays [were] a response to...students' grades," reflective essays at their very least ask students to think about the meaning of those grades, as well as that of the comments that may accompany them. Reading these essays can show faculty members how students evaluate our own evaluations of their writing.

Furthermore, writing the reflective essays is often students' only chance to develop and think about their own standards for good writing. Students consistently reported to us that they would never have looked at those papers again if we had not asked them to do so for these reflective essays.

Even though we believe in the value of student self-assessment—for students, faculty, and institutions—we also understand that using student reflections as assessment tools presents some problems for evaluation of writing proficiency. Determining whether a student's assessment of her own writing is accurate or not can be highly subjective. Furthermore, a "bad" self-assessment may not indicate that a student is a weak writer or thinker; it is just as likely that she had two final exams to take the next day. Therefore, although we believe student self-

reflection is essential to any departmental or institutional assessment plan, it should not be the only tool available to assessors.

STUDENT WRITING PROFICIENCY

Results from our portfolio assessment study indicate that it is possible to learn a great deal about students' writing and the overall writing program at the UW with portfolio assessment, but it is harder to make decisions about the writing proficiency of any individual writer. Faculty members participating in the three workshops felt that the writing in the portfolios they read was typical of the writing of their students, and that, except for two students' portfolios—Students G and H (see Appendix A for lists of portfolio contents for all students)—the students' writing was weak.

Because of the disagreement among faculty members in the same workshop and across the workshops about individual portfolios, it is impossible to specify general weaknesses. Faculty members did discuss possible reasons for the deficiencies they saw, and those are listed in "Conclusions about Proficiency," which ends this section.

The two students whose writing did not seem weak had done the most writing on the most complex topics. Student G's portfolio contained 12 long papers, several of which required research and all of which were written during the freshman year; Student G spent her sophomore year studying in China. Faculty members were impressed not only with the number of papers Student G had written but also with the complexity and high expectations of the assignments she had completed. Student H was an honors student whose portfolio contained 31 pieces of writing, many of which were discussions of difficult texts.

While faculty members felt that the other students' writing was generally weak, this opinion was not confirmed by students' grades. Table 1 provides a summary of several assessment measures including the following: student rankings and ratings by faculty assessors; student rankings by average of grades in the courses that required papers; student ranking by paper grade averages, and student ranking by overall GPA. As the grade measures on Table 1 show, only Student B received less than a 3.0 on paper grade averages, and then only in his freshman year. By his sophomore year, his paper grades averaged nearly a 3.2. In terms of overall GPA, only Student C earned below a 3.0, but her paper grades averaged a 3.8 her freshman year and a 3.71 her sophomore year.

Regarding individual students' writing proficiency, faculty assessors confirmed what students' grades told us about the "strong" writers. However, the pictures for "middle" and "weak" writers were confusing—and for different reasons. Portfolios placed in the middle group ended up there not because our participants agreed that these portfolios were of "middling" quality, but because participants could not agree on where the portfolios belonged. And the disparity between grades (paper grades, course grades, and GPA) and portfolio assessment of the two portfolios determined to be the weakest raised questions about the portfolio assessment process as a means of evaluating individuals' writing proficiency.

Strong Writers

As Table 1 shows, faculty members across all three workshops were in close agreement about which portfolios were the best. As stated earlier, the portfolios of Students G and H were considered the strongest. Student D's portfolio also well-regarded even though it contained few pieces of writing and even though our first assessment criterion (Appendix B) stipulated that the students had to have written "argumentative or other inquiry-based papers in two or more disciplines."

TABLE 1: PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT WORKSHOP RATINGS AND RANKINGS

	BEFORE DISCUSSION			AFTER DISCUSSION		
	Wkshp1	Wkshp2	Wkshp3	Wkshp1	Wkshp2	Wkshp3
RANKINGS BY ASSESSORS	G D F A C E B	H* G D C A F E B	H* G D C F A E B	G D C F A E B	H* G D C A F E B	H* G D C E F A B
RATINGS BY ASSESSORS	G F D A C E B	H* G D F A C E B	H* G D C F A E B	G D C F E A B	H* G C F D A E B	H* G D C E F A B
	WKSHP 1 (Fresh grades only)			WKSHPs 2&3(Frsh/Sph grds)		
RANKINGS BY AVERAGE OF GRADES IN COURSES REQUIRING PAPERS	D (4.00) G (3.78) C (3.50) F (3.40) A (3.37) B (3.22) E (3.20)			G (3.78) D (3.73) C (3.72) H* (3.69) F (3.45) B (3.29) A (3.24) E (3.23)		
RANKINGS BY AVERAGE OF PAPER GRADES	D (4.00) C (3.80) G (3.73) A (3.34) F (3.30) E (3.00) B (2.98)			D (4.00) G (3.73) C (3.71) H* (3.63) F (3.33) A (3.32) B (3.19) E (3.10)		
RANKINGS BY OVERALL GPA	NA			D (3.69) H* (3.65) G (3.60) E (3.46) F (3.29) B (3.26) E (3.10)		
PORTFOLIOS THAT FAILED	B			B,E (Wkshp2); B (Wkshp 3)		

*Student H's portfolio was not assessed by Workshop 1.

Moving down Table 1 to student rankings by grade, we can see that these three students ranked high by grade measures as well. Student H, an honors student, did not rank as highly in courses requiring papers as she did in overall GPA, and Student D, who wrote almost no papers, ranked very high by all grade measures.

Therefore, we can conclude that in relation to the "good writers," portfolio assessment merely confirmed the grade measures.

Middle Writers

The assessor ratings and rankings on Table 1 show that there was less agreement about the middle group--Portfolios A, C, E, and F--than about the other portfolios. The only real agreement was that these portfolios fell somewhere in the middle. Portfolio F seemed to move around the most in this middle group.

Figure 1 displays the wide disagreement among faculty members about how to assess these middle portfolios. The graphs on Figures 1 and 2 show that there is significant disagreement about whether some of the middle portfolios--A and E--should pass or fail. They also show that these ratings were not affected much by faculty discussion of the portfolios, but, when they were affected, discussion appears to have created less agreement about this middle group--A, E, and F, particularly--than it did about either the "good writer" or the "weak writer" portfolios.

It seems clear, then, that there was no real consensus on this middle group. They appear to be in the middle (rather than in the "weak" group) because of widespread faculty disagreement about the level of writing proficiency they demonstrated and about the level of performance required to qualify as "proficient."

In addition, grade measures do not give us a clearer picture of this middle group. For example, grade measures focusing on papers (courses requiring papers and average of paper grades) put Student C among the top students, while Student C's overall GPA is the lowest of the group. Student A's overall GPA is also relatively low--lower than the GPAs for students considered the weaker writers (B and E).

Both the disagreement among the faculty assessors and the unclear relationships among grade measures make it difficult to draw any conclusions about this group of writers, except that they fall somewhere in the middle, between the highly ranked writers and those regarded as weakest.

Weak Writers

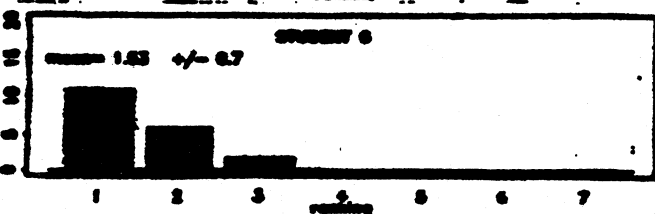
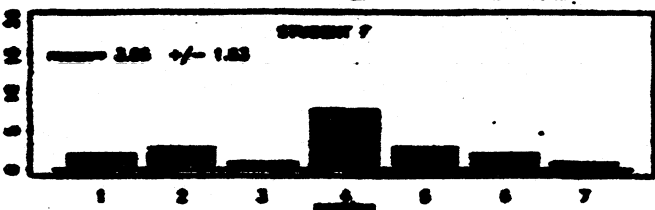
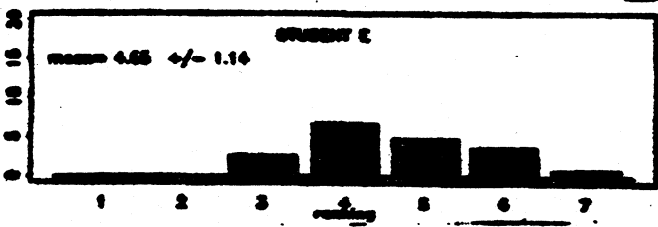
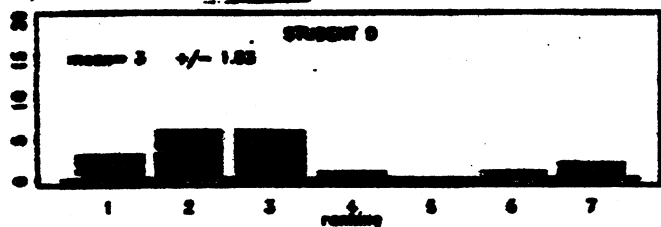
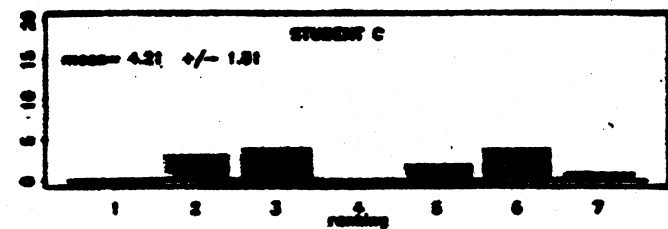
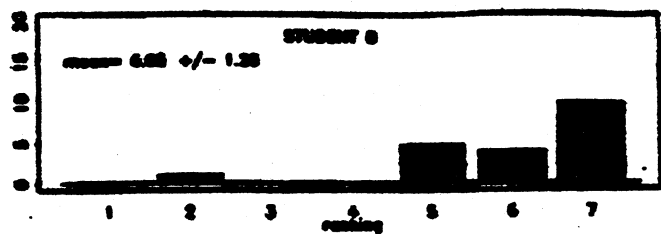
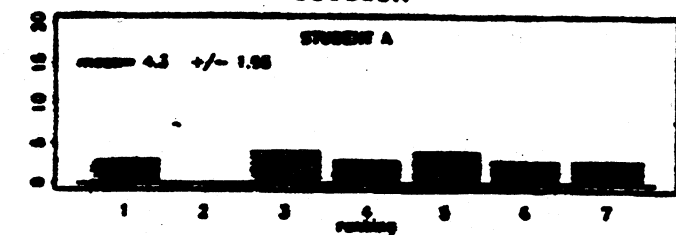
Regarding the two writers the faculty assessors considered weakest, Students B and E, the picture is even more confusing. Faculty members in all three groups ranked Student B's portfolio as the weakest. All three groups gave Student B a "fail" rating. Student E's portfolio was also considered weak, ranking next-to-last by most assessors and receiving a "fail" rating by the second group of faculty assessors. Therefore, as in the writers considered the strongest, there was a good deal of agreement about which writers were weakest.

However, none of the grade measures listed on Table 1--neither the average by courses requiring papers, nor the average of paper grades, nor the overall GPAs--agree with faculty assessors' decision to fail Student B's portfolio or the second workshop assessors' decision to fail Student E's as well. All three grade measures for both students placed students well above a 3.0 or a "B" average by the end of their sophomore years.

If we assume that the portfolio assessment workshops provided the most valid possible measure of writing proficiency at the UW, then the mismatch between grades and assessment for

FIGURE 1: STUDENT RANKINGS FOR ALL WORKSHOPS

BEFORE DISCUSSION



AFTER DISCUSSION

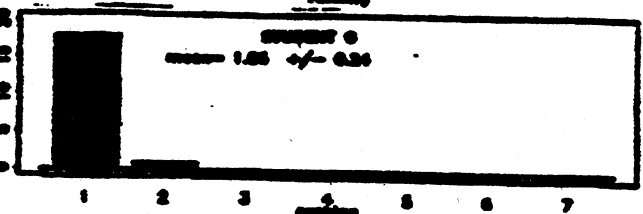
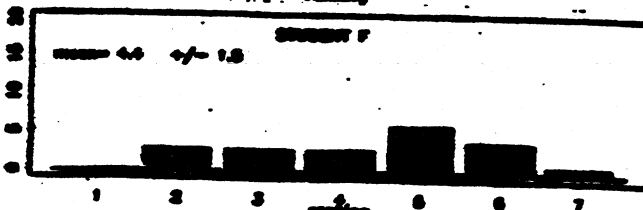
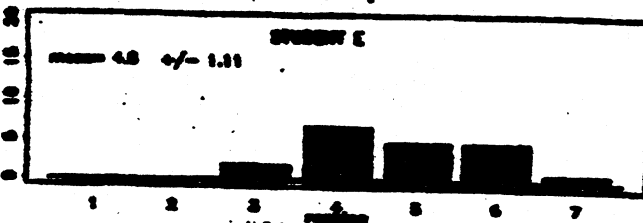
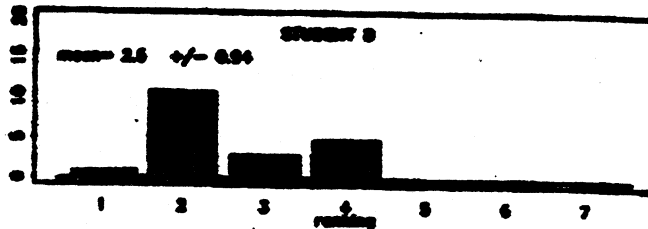
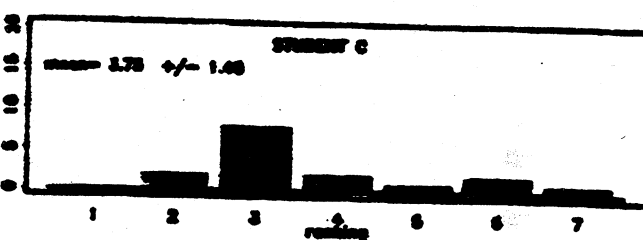
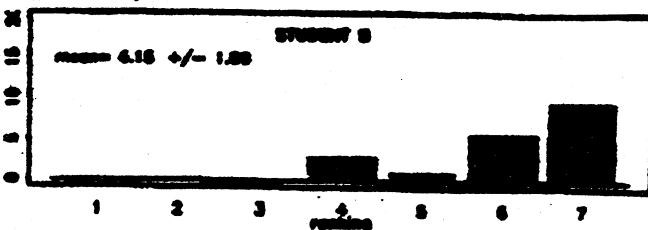
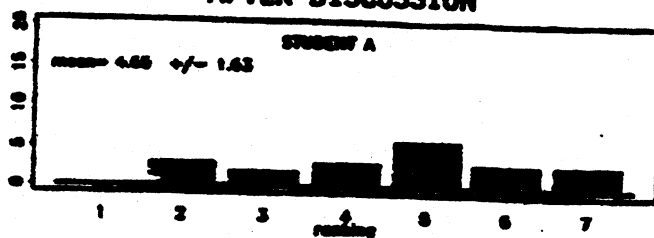
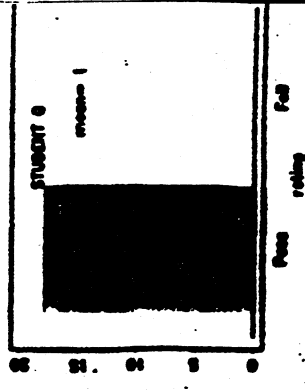
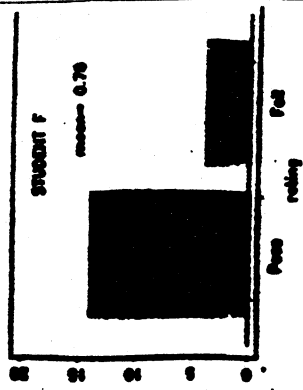
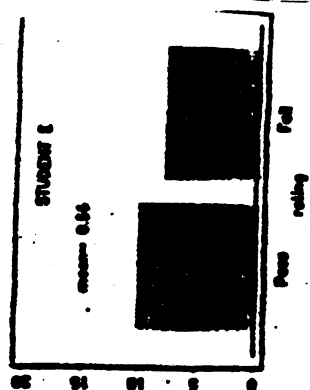
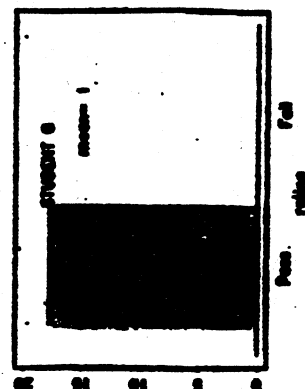
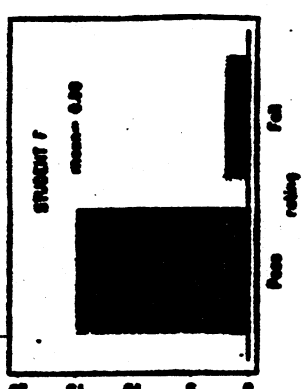
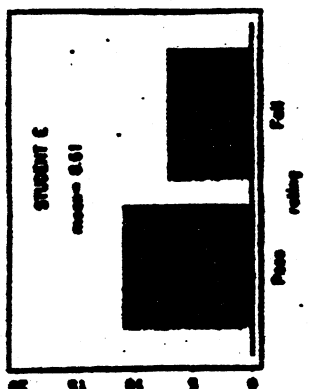


FIGURE 2: STUDENT RATINGS FOR ALL WORKSHOPS

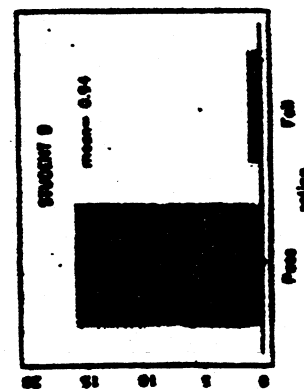
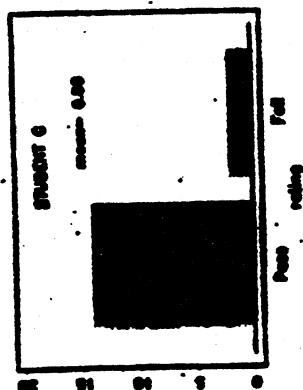
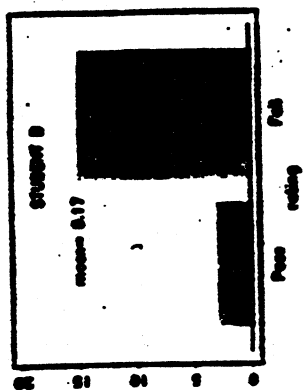
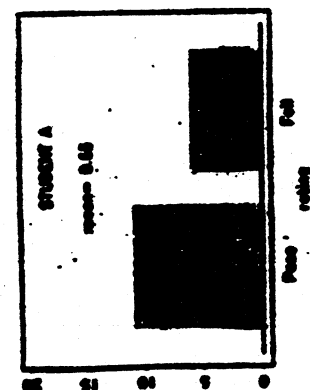
AFTER DISCUSSION



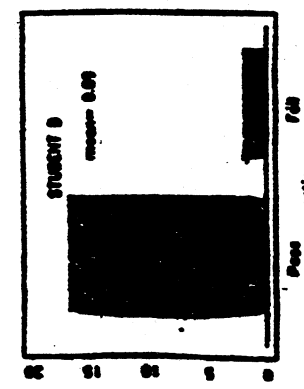
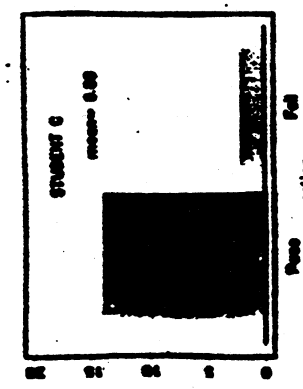
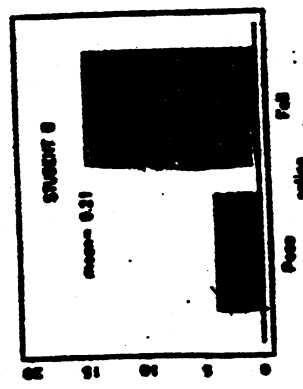
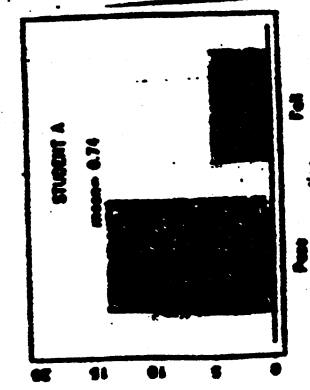
BEFORE DISCUSSION



AFTER DISCUSSION



BEFORE DISCUSSION



Students B and E suggests that these students have been evaluated too generously in the courses where they wrote. That means that many faculty members--not just one or two--have given these students an inflated sense of their own writing abilities.

However, we do not know the purposes for the writing in the courses these students took--what the professors who made the assignments intended students to do with them. We also do not know how important paper grades were in determining course grades. Finally, we do not know what level of performance others in the class met. Perhaps when weighed against other students in those courses, Students B and E were good writers.

Furthermore, one of these "weak" writers was a non-native English speaker. Several faculty evaluators noted that when they ignored the language and mechanics problems that are often found in non-native speakers' writing, the student's thinking was complex and interesting. It is possible, even likely, that this student's teachers may have taken that into account when grading the student's performance.

Therefore, while the portfolio workshops would suggest that Students B and E were the weakest writers among those whose portfolios were selected for assessment, this conclusion is problematic.

Conclusions about Proficiency

Portfolio assessment revealed that, regardless of the grades students receive, faculty members believe that student writing at the rising junior level is generally weak. Therefore, as a monitor of the writing proficiency of students in general at the UW, portfolio assessment could be beneficial.

Several reasons for students' writing deficiency were suggested, although there was no generally-agreed upon cause. Reasons suggested were as follows:

- some students do not write enough
- students do not receive enough instruction in writing when they are given writing assignments; they are not taught how specific disciplines make arguments
- assignments are poorly designed; expectations are often too low
- little can be transferred from what students write in "college writing" courses (English 111, 121, and 131) to writing assignments in other disciplines
- students are not taught to read and reread before they begin writing
- students are not taught to do research
- students are not given enough feedback on their writing

While portfolio assessment of individuals' writing proficiency seems inconclusive, we believe--and our faculty assessors confirmed overwhelmingly--that we can learn a great deal about students' writing proficiency in general with such assessment. More important, looking at students' writing proficiency in this way generates questions, answers, and information that faculty members can take into their own departments and classrooms, as the following section on faculty development and undergraduate education makes clear.

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT AND EFFECTS OF THE WORKSHOPS ON UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

All three assessment workshops provided convincing evidence that evaluating students' portfolios--the record of their accrued writing experience--can be a powerful tool for faculty development and a catalyst for improved undergraduate education.

Faculty members attending the workshops saw their value immediately. Mark Patterson, an English professor attending the second workshop said this about his experience: "For me, this has been the most valuable lesson I've had as a teacher of writing since I've been here. It will translate into what I do in the future." George Bridges, a sociology professor and a workshop participant had this to say: "If these were institutionalized, they would result in what the Provost refers to as a culture and a climate on this campus that fosters undergraduate education."

Faculty participants at the first workshop were so impressed with what they had learned in the process of reading and discussing students' portfolios that they drafted recommendations to the Provost on the spot (Appendix C). The first of the recommendations was that workshops such as these be held yearly so that the University could continue to "evaluate its own performance regarding student writing."

What the eight students' portfolios gave faculty members from a wide range of disciplines was something to have a conversation about--a focus. And it was a new focus: a longitudinal view of students' writing, rather than a cross-sectional view. Faculty members are used to seeing only a cross section of student writing--many students' responses to their own, single writing assignments. The information we get about our own teaching from this view of writing is considerably different from the information we get by reading the writing that individual students produce over time.

We believe that the longitudinal view provided faculty members with the following kinds of information, not always available with cross-sectional views:

- renewed understanding about the ways particular contexts shape student writing
- awareness of the range and variety of writing demands to which students in their own classes are responding
- a close look at the University's general education curriculum
- insight into their own course requirements and ideas for change
- a new understanding of the contribution student self-assessment can make to faculty and student learning

The Role of Context

The first perspective concerns the reasons for students' writing performances in particular contexts. Specifically, faculty members noted some of the ways the context shaped the students' writing.

For example, as discussed earlier in the section on Criteria Issues, faculty members learned that badly designed writing assignments could cause a good writer to write a bad paper. Student G (Appendix A) illustrated this problem for faculty assessors at all three workshops. Student G had written papers that participants had considered excellent for her international studies courses. But this same student wrote a very weak paper in response to an assignment in a political science course that asked students to "Write a paper on power." In contrast, the assignments for

the international studies papers were carefully detailed, asking students to research a region; identify a major change in the region brought about by economic interaction with other regions in the period between 1450 and 1750 for the first paper and between 1750 and 1945 for the second paper; and argue that this interaction brought about certain political and economic change in the region. Through the student's responses to these two types of assignments, faculty assessors saw clearly that high expectations and rigorous demands produced better writing than unclear demands or assignments that were too broad or too easy.

One participant, a political science professor, said this: "I learned here to pay closer attention to the way I construct writing assignments. I have a better idea now why that's important, having seen this spread of instructions themselves and students' responses to them."

A nursing professor agrees: "I've gained insight into the importance of clearly thinking through and clearly articulating the assignment. I often found that students had not responded to these assignments, and I now think--well, whose fault is that? Some of it is ours. We need to think through what skills a student needs to have to write the [papers we assign]."

Also, regarding context, the question of support was raised. Faculty members realized that some of the students' papers were better than others by virtue of the writing help made available to the students in those courses. Student G, for example, had received a great deal of writing instruction for her international studies papers, but very little in her political science course.

Furthermore, participants saw how students could misread the context when they were not taught to read it correctly. For example, the papers and reflective essays that Students A and E (Appendix A) wrote demonstrated that these two students had trouble writing papers for History 204, because they did not fully understand what history is. They both had thought of history as a list of events, not a series of arguments. Therefore, they both had difficulty writing a paper that asked them to evaluate an historical argument.

To make those difficulties worse, it was clear from the students' reflective essays that the history course instructors had not anticipated this problem and, therefore, did not foreground for students how historians think and argue. The students, then, were forced to operate on assumptions about history that they'd learned in high school, and those assumptions led them to write poor papers. Indeed, by the end of their second year at the UW, as their reflective essays suggested, only one of these two students had figured out where he had gone wrong on the two history papers.

In addition, as mentioned in the section on criteria, faculty members clearly saw that students who handle writing assignments badly in one course may do well in others because they are more comfortable with the subject matter and the writing demands in that course than those in others. This meant that a student who wrote weak papers in their courses was not necessarily a bad writer, nor was the reverse necessarily true.

Finally, faculty members noted the relationship between knowing how to read the materials required by a course and knowing how to write the papers assigned in the course. A student who can read a short story critically may not be able to read a sociology study critically, and yet a student may be assigned to write analyses of both, which presumes the ability to read both critically. Therefore, the importance of teaching students to read (and reread) before they can write was apparent to faculty members, as they followed one students' work through several disciplines.

Range and Variety of Writing Demands

A kind of information that faculty members gained by the longitudinal view of students' writing was a sense of the range and variety of writing demands that students in their courses were working to meet. Faculty found that writing demands—both the number of papers and the type of writing students had to do—were surprisingly uneven, "a tremendous unevenness about what is asked of students over the course of time," as one faculty assessor put it. One student's portfolio—Student D—contained one paper, while another's—Student H—contained more than 30.

Faculty members saw that this meant that some students enter their courses with a good deal of writing experience, both in and outside their disciplines. Others enter with virtually no writing experience. Yet both groups are expected to understand assigned paper topics in the same way and to know the process that writing those papers will demand.

In addition, faculty members discovered that students with a good deal of writing experience in one discipline could not necessarily import the skills they learned in that discipline to writing demands in another. The gap between writing demands in freshman composition courses (English 111, 121, and 131) and writing demands in other disciplines, for example, was especially problematic for faculty participants. Faculty members pointed out that papers for English 131, the most popular composition course, did not demand that students use evidence from a variety of sources to support the arguments they were making, while paper topics in nearly all other courses, regardless of the discipline, did. Furthermore, papers for English 111 and 121 required students to write literary arguments, which is a type of argument not found in other disciplines. If these courses were designed to teach writing for the English major, these differences in writing type and use of sources would not present problems. However, these courses are called "college writing" courses and all students, regardless of their majors, are required to take one of them.

This difference between writing skills demanded in one course versus those required in another was not confined to the gap between composition courses and courses in the disciplines. One faculty member, for example, pointed out the difficulty students would have shifting from the writing demands imposed by Chemistry 151 labs to those demanded by a drama course in the same quarter; he also noted that faculty members do not have to make that shift and are usually unaware that their own students are making it or ones like it every quarter.

General Education

Because the range and variety of writing experience students received in their first two years at the UW were so apparent to faculty assessors, they learned something about the general education curriculum—the third perspective made possible by longitudinal samples. Faculty members learned, for example, that students did little writing in social science courses (Appendix A). They also learned that writing assignments in the first two years tended to be short and tended not to require research.

The absence of research-based writing assignments was discussed by faculty members at some length, particularly at the second portfolio assessment workshop. Faculty lamented the fact that the UW has some of the finest research facilities in the country, but that students are neither taught the process of research as freshmen and sophomores, nor are they asked to do much research. A sociology professor said, "Students don't get a chance to learn that *first* they must investigate and *then* they can put themselves back into [the argument]." A geography professor felt that without doing much research, students will never understand what she called "the fallibility of evidence." Therefore, they will not be able to think critically when confronted by others' arguments.

What faculty members learned about the general education curriculum is that it is a different curriculum for each student and that writing can play a significant role or none at all in each student's general education courses. One faculty member had this to say a year after participating in the workshops: "I learned (again, I guess) how fragmented and disconnected undergraduate education can be. It isn't always, and there were courses we saw which were exciting and well-designed. But what a hodgepodge!"

Course Development

A fourth benefit of the longitudinal view of students' writing is the new perspective some faculty members gained about their own courses. In a large institution like the UW, professors of large lecture courses often never see the papers their own assignments produce. In these workshops, a professor found himself facing two students' confused attempts to respond to an unclear assignment he had made; another found herself looking at the generous grades her own teaching assistants had given to undeserving responses; another professor read lab reports that made no sense but that had been praised. When these professors confronted these problems, all participants were forced to think about their own courses, their own assignments, their own supervision of TAs.

Faculty members learned ways they could modify those courses, too. They shared ideas. They helped each other solve problems. And they took what they learned into their classrooms. For example, changes that a sociology professor made in short pieces of writing required in a popular undergraduate course affected more than 1,000 freshmen and sophomores the following year. An international studies professor made changes in writing requirements after a discussion with a professor in a different discipline; those changes affected more than 200 freshmen and sophomores the next year. A science professor decided to build more student self-assessment into his courses, which affected the writing experience of about 200 students each year.

Finally, after his participation in the workshop, a business professor helped design a new linked writing course for majors. A year after his involvement in the assessment project, he says, "It would certainly be overstating the case to say that this venture was a direct result of my participation in the workshop, but, on the other hand, the workshop did influence my thinking about writing, probably making me more aware of the value of writing as an educational tool to learn more about a subject...."

Furthermore, changes professors have made in writing assignments, instruction, or in grading have been felt by the TAs--sometimes called "the emerging professoriate"--working under these professors. Therefore, these changes have the potential to affect students at other institutions, the students these TAs will one day teach.

Student Self-Assessment

As reported earlier in the Criteria section, faculty members saw the value of student self-assessment for both students and themselves. They saw that when we ask students to tell us what they have learned, we are giving them the opportunity to know what they know--to see where they have come and how they have gotten there. One faculty member said, "The reflective essays show how important it is [for students] to go back and look again at what they've done." Finally, faculty members also were able to see the standards students employed as they evaluated their own performances, which helped faculty understand the relationship between what they value in writing and what students value.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As our results show, the contribution of portfolio assessment workshops to the improvement of undergraduate education has been and can continue to be significant. We held only three workshops, but they had the potential to affect the learning experiences of thousands of students. Therefore, we recommend that the UW continue to collect and maintain a sample of student writing portfolios and that the UW use these portfolios to evaluate its own performance and its students' proficiency as part of its assessment plan. In addition, we recommend that these portfolio assessment workshops be acknowledged as the powerful faculty development tool that they are and that faculty members who participate in them continue to receive fair compensation for their involvement.

APPENDIX A: CONTENTS OF STUDENTS' PORTFOLIOS

STUDENT A

Fall 1989

Math 124
Chemistry 140
History 204 - Two papers evaluating
historians' treatment of events

Winter 1990

Math 125
Chemistry 150
Chemistry 151 - Five lab reports
English 131 - Three arguments and one
extended definition

Spring 1990

Math 126
Chemistry 164
Drama 101 - One literary analysis and one
production design

Fall 1990

Chemistry 237
Biology 201
Sociology 110 - Four short papers

Winter 1991

Chemistry 238
Chemistry 241
Economics 200
Biology 202 - One paper and two
extra credit article
summaries

Spring 1991

Chemistry 239
Biology 203
French 102

STUDENT B

Fall 1989

Art 109
Oceanography 101
English 131 - Four arguments and one
literary analysis

Winter 1990

Math 125
History 113 - One paper evaluating
an historian's treatment of
an event
English 204 - Three literary analyses

Spring 1990

Oceanography 102
Sociology 110
Environmental Studies 205 - Two informative
papers

Fall 1990

Computer Science 210
Economics 200
Environmental Studies 203 - One
informative paper

Winter 1991

Linguistics 200
Art History 204 - Two arguments
Drama 101 - One literary analysis
one production design

Spring 1991

Arch. and Urban Planning 200
General Studies 391

STUDENT C

Fall 1989

Chemistry 140
Math 124
Classics 210 (dropped)

Winter 1990

Math 125
Engineering 141
Chemistry 150A
Music 116
Engineering 110 - Short article summary
and goals statement

Spring 1990

Math 126
Chemistry 499
Chemistry 150B
Chemistry 151 - Five lab reports

Fall 1990

Chemistry 160
Physics 121
Physics 131

Winter 1991

Physics 122
Math 307
Sociology 271 - Six short responses

Spring 1991

Math 308
Engineering 199 - Short article
summary
Tech. Com. 400 - Four short pieces,
one case study,
and one prog.
report
Tech. Com. 401 - Two shortpieces

STUDENT D

Fall 1989

Geography 100
Math 156
French 103

Winter 1990

Math 157
Atmos. Sci. 101
Sociology 110

Spring 1990

Geology 101
Psychology 101
Philosophy 100 - Two take-home exams

Fall 1990

Accounting 210
Economics 200
Scandinavian 200 - One fairy tale

Winter 1991

Accounting 220
Architecture 150
Bus. Law (OE) 200 - One short
response

Spring 1991

Accounting 230
Economics 201
Quan. Methods 201 - Two data
analyses

STUDENT E

Fall 1989

Fisheries 101
Psychology 101
History 204 - Two papers evaluating
historians' treatment of events

Winter 1990

Economics 200
Math 156
English 111 - Three literary analyses

Spring 1990

Economics 201
Math 157
Oceanography 101

Fall 1990

Accounting 210
Sociology 271 - Five short responses
Poli. Sci. 101 - One argument

Winter 1991

Bus. Law (OE) 200
Accounting 220

Spring 1991

Accounting 230
Philosophy 100
Quan. Methods 201

STUDENT F

Fall 1989

Math 105
Psychology 101
English 131 - Four arguments

Winter 1990

Geology 101
Geography 100
French 102

Spring 1990

Physics 205
Geography 207
French 103

Fall 1990

Accounting 210 (dropped)
Economics 200
Speech 220 - Two written speeches

Winter 1991

Accounting 210
Bus. Law (OE) 200
Psychology 437

Spring 1991

Accounting 220
Math 157
Psychology 499

STUDENT G

Fall 1989

Chinese 111
English 131 - Four arguments
Internat'l Studies 200 - Two research-based arguments

Winter 1990

Chinese 112
Economics 200
Poli. Sci. 203 - One paper on a concept

Spring 1990

Chinese 113
Internat'l Studies 202 - Annotated bib. and one research-based argument
English 198 (writing link to IS 202) - Three arguments, two research-based

Fall 1990

Study in China

Winter 1991

Study in China

Spring 1991

Did not register because of family illness

STUDENT H

Fall 1989

Math 124
Chemistry 145 (dropped)
Marching band
Philosophy 100 - Two arguments

Winter 1990

Math 125
Honors A&S 252 - Three literary analyses and a take-home exam
GIS 271 (writing link to A&S 252) - Three literary analyses

Spring 1990

Psychology 101
Honors A&S 253 - Ten arguments about readings
Honors A&S 222 - Take-home exam

Fall 1990

Italian 101
Honors A&S 251 - Two arguments
Honors A&S 220 - Two arguments

Winter 1991

Italian 102
Honors A&S 221 - Two arguments
History 112 - Two arguments on historical texts
Scandinavian 100 - Two informative papers

Spring 1991

Italian 103
Internat'l Studies 202 - Two arguments
English 231 - Papers not available

**APPENDIX B: CRITERIA PROVIDED TO FACULTY ASSESSORS FOR SECOND AND
THIRD PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT WORKSHOPS**

Please use the criteria listed below to rate the student's writing proficiency; then answer the questions on the next page. You may add comments on the back of the sheet.

CRITERIA

**RATING
(PASS/FAIL)**

<p>1. The portfolio demonstrates that the student has written argumentative or other inquiry-based papers in two or more disciplines.</p>																			
<p>2. Overall, the student's papers show evidence of the following elements, which are listed in order of importance:</p> <p>(Please indicate the presence or absence of these elements by circling the plus or minus after each one. Then give your pass/fail rating for this criterion.</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>a. A main assertion (thesis, hypothesis) for the paper</td> <td align="right">+</td> <td align="right">-</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b. Evidence to support that assertion and its subarguments (what this term means may vary from one discipline to another)</td> <td align="right">+</td> <td align="right">-</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c. A clear path of the writer's reasoning through the paper; the presence of the thesis in the subarguments</td> <td align="right">+</td> <td align="right">-</td> </tr> <tr> <td>d. Parts of the paper (sections, paragraphs, sentences) related to each other as well as to the main assertion, explicitly for some disciplines, less explicitly for others</td> <td align="right">+</td> <td align="right">-</td> </tr> <tr> <td>e. Use of sources outside the self</td> <td align="right">+</td> <td align="right">-</td> </tr> <tr> <td>f. General adherence to standard rules of spelling, punctuation, and grammar</td> <td align="right">+</td> <td align="right">-</td> </tr> </table>	a. A main assertion (thesis, hypothesis) for the paper	+	-	b. Evidence to support that assertion and its subarguments (what this term means may vary from one discipline to another)	+	-	c. A clear path of the writer's reasoning through the paper; the presence of the thesis in the subarguments	+	-	d. Parts of the paper (sections, paragraphs, sentences) related to each other as well as to the main assertion, explicitly for some disciplines, less explicitly for others	+	-	e. Use of sources outside the self	+	-	f. General adherence to standard rules of spelling, punctuation, and grammar	+	-	
a. A main assertion (thesis, hypothesis) for the paper	+	-																	
b. Evidence to support that assertion and its subarguments (what this term means may vary from one discipline to another)	+	-																	
c. A clear path of the writer's reasoning through the paper; the presence of the thesis in the subarguments	+	-																	
d. Parts of the paper (sections, paragraphs, sentences) related to each other as well as to the main assertion, explicitly for some disciplines, less explicitly for others	+	-																	
e. Use of sources outside the self	+	-																	
f. General adherence to standard rules of spelling, punctuation, and grammar	+	-																	
<p>3. The student's reflective essays demonstrate learning and/or consideration of the presence or absence of some of the above six elements.</p>																			

**APPENDIX C: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FACULTY PARTICIPANTS IN THE
PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT WORKSHOP TO THE PROVOST**

TO: Provost Laurel Wilkening
FROM: Freshman/Sophomore Writing Study
Portfolio Assessment Workshop Participants
DATE: February 20, 1991

On February 8, 1991, six faculty members and one administrator, representing seven disciplines, met to discuss their assessment of seven students' freshman year writing portfolios. Participants included Jon Bridgman (history), Bob Crutchfield (sociology), Christine Di Stefano (political science), Jerry Gillmore (educational assessment), Gary Handwerk (English), Joel Migdal (international studies), and Bill Moody (zoology). Joan Graham and Cathy Beyer conducted the workshop, and they are preparing a complete report.

However, one outcome can be reported immediately. The faculty participants, all of whom use writing in their courses and advocate the use of writing as a way of learning, ended the day's discussion by formulating recommendations to be sent to the Provost. These recommendations are as follows:

- o The University should put resources and funding into monitoring student writing and should evaluate its performance regarding student writing annually. We found that using portfolios that included paper topics, the papers students wrote, lists of courses students took, and a reflective essay in which students discuss their written work was a good method for monitoring the undergraduate curriculum.
- o The University should provide faculty with more information about the writing that students are required to do here. Such information will aid curriculum planning and help improve teaching.
- o The University should send high school advisors sample writing assignments and student papers from UW classes. These samples would let high school faculty members, students, and advisors know the kinds of writing that students entering the UW will be expected to do.
- o More courses, including those with large enrollments, should require writing than apparently do now. This is particularly important for courses that typically enroll freshmen and sophomores. Frequent and varied writing opportunities enhance learning and help students develop and improve writing skills. We cannot expect juniors and seniors to write effectively if they have not been asked to write as underclassmen.
- o Introductory courses typically taken by freshmen and sophomores should have smaller enrollments, so that writing can be used as a way to help students develop reading, critical thinking, and writing skills.
- o Teaching assistants who are expected to work with student

writing should be rigorously trained in writing instruction. Training should be ongoing and should include the participation of the faculty members who assign writing.

- o More Interdisciplinary Writing Program writing courses should be linked with large lecture courses than are currently offered. Students who take the writing links understand course material and get higher grades in the lecture courses than students who do not take the links.
- o The University should let departments now developing senior or capstone projects for their majors know about other models, particularly the Jackson School of International Studies senior paper. The Jackson School requires its seniors to write one paper that embodies two quarters of study and that has gone through multiple draft stages.
- o Students and advisors should look beyond the individual course and think about each undergraduate's curriculum as a whole. The University should make information on writing required by undergraduate courses available to both students and advisors, so that students can plan schedules that include reasonable amounts and varied kinds of writing.

cc: Herman Lujan
Gerald Gillmore

