Form E-1-A for Boston College Core Curriculum

Department/Program: English (First-Year Writing Program)

1) Have formal learning outcomes for the department’s Core courses been developed? What are they? (What specific sets of skills and knowledge does the department expect students completing its Core courses to have acquired?)

Yes. We have a formal outcomes statement for First-Year Writing developed by the program director in 2004 and revised most recently in 2015.

Also, the FWS Program solicited and conducted an External Review (with an accompanying Self Study) in 2001.

Outcomes for the Boston College First-Year Writing Seminar (Updated March 2015)

Rhetorical Knowledge

By the end of first year composition, students should

- Focus on a purpose in their writing
- Respond to the needs of different audiences
- Respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations, including but not limited to academic rhetorical situations
- Write in several genres

Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing

By the end of first year composition, students should

- Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating
- Understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources
- Integrate their own ideas with those of others

Processes

By the end of first year composition, students should

- Be aware that it usually takes multiple drafts to create and complete a successful text
- Develop flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proof-reading
- Understand writing as an open process that permits writers to use later invention and re-thinking to revise their work
- Understand the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes
- Learn to critique their own and others' works
- Learn to balance the advantages of relying on others with the responsibility of doing their part

Knowledge of Conventions

By the end of first year composition, students should

- Learn common formats for different kinds of texts
- Develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics
- Practice appropriate means of documenting their work
- Control such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
Composing in Electronic Environments

By the end of first-year composition, students should:

- Use electronic environments for drafting, reviewing, revising, editing, and sharing texts
- Locate, evaluate, organize, and use research material collected from electronic sources, including scholarly library databases; other official databases (e.g., federal government databases); and informal electronic networks and internet sources
- Understand and exploit the differences in the rhetorical strategies and in the affordances available for both print and electronic composing processes and texts

Other Requirements for First-Year Writing Seminar

- **A Guiding Question**: Every FWS class should be organized by an identifiable question that helps unite the assignments and create a logic in terms of sequencing. The goal is to ask a question that can serve as a ‘refrain’ that the course can return to, as a way to learn more about writers and writing. Inquiries can be somewhat topic-oriented, such as “In what ways does social networking unite us, and in what ways does it isolate us?” or “To what extent is language powerful and to what extent is it not?” Alternatively, a question can focus more directly on rhetorical issues and the craft of writing, such as “How does or should writing change when my audience and purpose changes?” Or “What is evidence and how does that differ by rhetorical situation?” The goal is to help student be critical readers, writers and thinkers, by discovering how writing in service of a question can help deepen and complicate their understanding of the question, as well as learn how such a semester-long extended question should help them learn skills of writing.

- **“Metacognitive Awareness”**: In addition to doing reading and critical thinking, the course is most fundamentally a course in writing. According to a study at Pepperdine University, a primary benefit of a first-year writing course is to help students develop skills of metacognitive awareness—an ability to reflect on their learning to understand what and how they’re learning. In FWS, we can’t prepare students to write for every rhetorical situation they will ever face in college or beyond, but we can help them learn to understand a rhetorical task and help them be mindful about discovering, learning or asking about appropriate ways of responding. Keys to metacognitive awareness might include helping students critically read complex assignment prompts, learn conventions of different genres, and be reflective about what writing lessons they have learned and are learning.

- **Conferences**: Instructors will conference with each student individually for at least 15-20 no fewer than four times a semester. Ideally, the first conference will take place within the first three weeks of class. If an instructor wishes to conference more frequently, they may (but need not) cancel 50 minutes of class time during the additional week(s) of conferences.

- **Reading Other Students’ and Professionals’ Work**: One belief of the BC FWS program is that students learn well while reading the polished and in-process writing of other students, as well as the finished work of professional writers and scholars. That means each section should include some polished writing by students. *Fresh Ink* is an online publication of student writing that you can use in the class as well archives of individual instructors’ student papers.

- **Four to Five Formal Papers**: While instructors have a great deal of flexibility around the assignments you create, to assure courses are roughly equal in terms of work and rigor, imagine an equivalent of four to five formal papers (roughly 25 pages) plus lots of informal writing (reading responses, journals, in-class writing etc) as the amount of work desirable for the course. This work can be in separate papers or can be combined or build off one another in some ways.

- **Working with Academic Texts**: At least one assignment should ask students to work critically with an academic text and put it into conversation with other texts and ideas.
- **Include Formal Introduction to Research Writing and BC Research Resources:** FWS is the only course at BC guaranteed to introduce students to the resources of the BC library system. As such, all FWS courses should include one or more opportunities for students to engage in research writing and should include an orientation to the library led by a BC librarian. You can register for your desired date for a library visit to your class through the BC library website. (More on that later.)

- **Some Portfolio Grading:** To underscore the value of revision and reflection, at least some portion of the FWS final grade should be based on a portfolio that the students create and reflect on near the end of the term. Portfolio grading should provide students some opportunity for semester-long development and revision of work.

- **Attendance:** You must have a clear attendance policy included in your syllabus. (Trust me, if you don’t have one, you’ll regret it at some point in the semester when you have a student who has not been attending and you have no specific guideline to refer to.) Here is a recommended range:

  - *The institution states that students will be expected to attend class regularly. More than one week of unexcused absences will result in a failing participation grade and more than two weeks of unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for the course.*

2) **Where are these learning outcomes published? Be specific.** (Where are the department’s expected learning outcomes for its Core courses accessible: on the web, in the catalog, or in your department handouts?)

   We have a handout for all new instructors, as well as a checklist that breaks the outcomes into specific goals. We also publish the outcomes statement on our website.

3) **Other than GPA, what data/evidence is used to determine whether students have achieved the stated outcomes for the Core requirement?** (What evidence and analytical approaches do you use to assess which of the student learning outcomes have been achieved more or less well?)

   We did a formal program assessment starting in 2013, where we chose one outcome (critical reading and writing) to assess. We asked all instructors to submit three essays where all instructor and student names had been removed. We performed a two-step process: a norming session to determine what we meant by a 2, 3, 4 or 5 in each category. Then we randomly selected essays to evaluate. (See the full attached report for more details on the assessment.)

4) **Who interprets the evidence? What is the process?** (Who in the department is responsible for interpreting the data and making recommendations for curriculum or assignment changes if appropriate? When does this occur?)

   A committee of composition staff (the faculty director and three instructors and program mentors) performed the assessment: one selected a range of essays for the other three to norm. Then we all worked together to assess a random group of essays.
ADDENDUM: 2013 FWS ASSESSMENT

Boston College First-Year Writing Program
2013 Program Assessment

18 July 2013

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Summary:

In 2012-2013, the BC First-Year Writing Program undertook its first program assessment. The Assessment Team began by examining the already stated outcomes for the program and selected to focus on one: how well the program was teaching Critical Reading and Writing to first-year students. We requested that instructors anonymously submit three essays from each section (with any identification removed) and created a rubric based on our stated outcomes. We chose roughly 25% of the essays submitted for norming and assessment: the norming helped the team define what the critical reading and writing criteria meant and looked like in student writing, and the assessment helped us see what areas students (and the program) were doing well and where they (we) can benefit from more work.

Overall, we discovered that we are doing a solid job teaching Critical Reading and Writing but could improve in all areas. Examining the data, we decided to focus ongoing pedagogical efforts on helping students put their own ideas into conversation with others, as this seemed to be the area where most students could develop more. Over the next two years, we hope to explore this issue through guest speakers, symposia, our mentoring program, and in our ongoing staff meetings. After two years of such efforts, we hope to repeat our assessment to see if and in what ways students’ understandings of Critical Reading and Writing have changed or developed.

Purpose of Program Assessment

Many university faculty members cringe at the mention of assessment, especially at the program or departmental level. “We give grades, isn’t that assessment enough?” is a refrain commonly heard.

While grading assesses how well students perform on what we ask them to perform, program assessment asks a bigger question, “How well are we teaching what we hope or claim to be teaching in our program?” And more importantly, it asks, “Where can we improve our teaching? How can we make our program better?”

With those pedagogical aims central to the project, the First Year Writing Program at Boston College undertook its first program assessment in 2012-3, with an eye toward enhancing teaching the in program in the coming years. Our goal is that the assessment will lead to specific teaching initiatives (workshops, speakers, teacher colloquia) leading from our assessment results, and will lead to a follow-up assessment in three years.
FWS Program's Goals and Outcomes

The FWS Program is united not by a uniform pedagogy but by a shared set of goals or outcomes, which have been adapted from the Council of Writing Program Administrators). They are as follows:

Outcomes for the Boston College First-Year Writing Seminar (Updated March 2013)

Rhetorical Knowledge
By the end of first year composition, students should
- Focus on a purpose
- Respond to the needs of different audiences
- Respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations, including but not limited to academic rhetorical situations.
- Understand how genres shape reading and writing
- Write in several genres

Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing
By the end of first year composition, students should
- Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating
- Understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources
- Integrate their own ideas with those of others

Processes
By the end of first year composition, students should
- Be aware that it usually takes multiple drafts to create and complete a successful text
- Develop flexible strategies for generating, revising, editing, and proof-reading
- Understand writing as an open process that permits writers to use later invention and re-thinking to revise their work
- Understand the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes
- Learn to critique their own and others' works
- Learn to balance the advantages of relying on others with the responsibility of doing their part
- Use a variety of technologies to address a range of audiences

Knowledge of Conventions
By the end of first year composition, students should
- Learn common formats for different kinds of texts
- Develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics
- Practice appropriate means of documenting their work
- Control such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

Composing in Electronic Environments
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- Use electronic environments for drafting, reviewing, revising, editing, and sharing texts
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1 To read the full outcomes statement, how it can be extended beyond first-year writing, and its methodology, go to wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html
Assessment Plan

The assessment team for this first project included three primary people—Paula Mathieu, Matthew Heitzman and Kristin Imre—with additional help from Martha Hincks. All are members of the FWS Program Staff (Paula is program Director, Matthew and Kristin are Mentors to new FWS instructors, and Martha is Associate Program Director.) We decided on this internal team because assessment is new to our program, and we felt that it would be easier to figure out the process and the rubrics, this first time, in a smaller group that already meets to discuss teaching. In future assessments, we hope to include a broader range of FWS instructors in the actual project.)

For this first assessment, we decided to select one of the outcomes, as a way to focus our efforts most effectively. We chose Critical Thinking, Reading and Writing as the outcome for the assessment because of its central importance to helping students write within the university. This outcome, once again, states as follows:

Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing
By the end of first year composition, students should
- Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating
- Understand a writing assignment as a series of tasks, including finding, evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing appropriate primary and secondary sources
- Integrate their own ideas with those of others
- Understand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power

Assessment Rubric

In order to assess Critical Thinking, Reading and Writing, we turned the stated outcome into the following rubric, composed of four questions, which were developed by Paula Mathieu, Matthew Heitzman and Kristin Imre:
FWS Program Assessment (2013) – Scoring Rubric

Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing

1. Is there evidence of a genuine inquiry, where writing is used for learning, thinking, and communicating?

(5) – Essays scored a five offer exceptional evidence of a genuine inquiry, and fluently use writing for communication, learning and thinking.
(4) – Essays scored a four offer strong evidence of a genuine inquiry, and clearly use writing for communication, learning and thinking.
(3) – Essays scored a three show evidence of a genuine inquiry, and are able to use writing for communication, learning and thinking.
(2) – Essays scored a two struggle to offer clear evidence of a genuine inquiry, and do not consistently use writing for communication, learning and thinking.
– Essays scored a one show little evidence of a genuine inquiry, and do not clearly use writing for communication, learning and thinking.

2. Does the essay adequately evaluate, analyze, and synthesize appropriate primary or secondary sources?

(5) – Essays scored a five demonstrate an advanced ability to analyze, evaluate and synthesize primary or secondary sources.
(4) – Essays scored a four skillfully analyze, evaluate and synthesize primary or secondary sources.
– Essays scored a three adequately analyze, evaluate and synthesize primary or secondary sources.
– Essays scored a two partially analyze, evaluate and synthesize primary or secondary sources.
– Essays scored a one fail to adequately analyze, evaluate and synthesize primary or secondary sources.

3. Does the writer integrate their own ideas with those of others?

– In essays scored a five writers deeply integrate their ideas with those of others.
– In essays scored a four writers clearly integrate their own ideas with those of others.
– In essays scored a three writers are able to integrate their own ideas with those of others.
– In essays scored a two writers struggle to integrate their own ideas with those of others.
– In essays scored a one writers are unable to integrate their own ideas with those of others.

4. Does the essay acknowledge that there are complex relationships among language, knowledge, and power?

– Essays scored a five offer an extended analysis of the complex relationships between language, knowledge and power.
– Essays scored a four pointedly acknowledge the complex relationships between language, knowledge and power.
– Essays scored a three make an effort to acknowledge the complex relationships between language, knowledge and power.
– Essays scored a two only obliquely acknowledge the complex relationships between language, knowledge and power.
– Essays scored a one make no effort to acknowledge the complex relationships between language, knowledge and power.
Collecting of Essays: At the end of the fall semester, we asked each Fall 2012 FWS instructor to randomly pick three essays from a single assignment, one that asked student to engage critically other texts. We asked that they remove any identifying information (of teacher and student) and hand them in by the end of the fall semester. If everyone had complied, we would have received 175 essays; in reality we received 144. We randomly choose 25% of those essays (or 36 essays) for norming and scoring.

Norming: The norming session, which we had initially thought would be a preliminary step in the assessment process, in reality turned into the longest and perhaps most useful step in the project. Martha Hincks, Associate FWS Director, selected 10 essays, which she felt represented a range of quality, in terms of critical reading and writing. Her only role was to select the 10 texts, not order them in any way, and give them to the assessment team. The purpose of the norming session was for the group of the three of us to come to a shared understanding, for each question, what constituted a five, four, three, or two (we were hoping not to find many “ones”, and in fact, didn’t) for each rubric question.

In practice, we spent eight hours and much discussion to work through those 10 essays. This discussion helped us clarify the terms of our assessment: for example, regarding questions 3, which analyzes how well the writer integrates their own ideas with those of another, we decided that an essay that merits a three uses (or sometimes parrots) a source as their inquiry, in a four the writer clearly distinguishes the his or her ideas from the source he or she is using, and in a 5, the writer forwards that source into unique territory or raises new questions.

As a group, we found the norming session to be very fruitful in terms of the specifics of our pedagogy: what do we really mean by analyze? What do we mean by issues of power? It is those kinds of discussion we want to bring from the assessment into the larger community of FWS instructors.

Assessment Reading

The same team (Matt, Kristin, Paula) that did the norming of the essays read and scored the remaining 26 essays, to evaluate how well, as a program we were teaching critical reading and writing. We used the normed essays as our benchmarks, so many conversations were, “Does this seem stronger or weaker than the Flight essay? Does it use evidence the same as or better than the analysis of sports superstitions? Is this as strong as the critique of the Edmundson essay?” The normed essays helped us place the 26 essays and rate the level of critical reading and writing based on the four questions we developed.

The Data
On the next page are the scores and their various averages:
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Mean 3.307692308
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Mode 4 4

Mean Evaluate Sources 3.346153846
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Mean Power 2.884615385
Analysis
If we look at mean averages, the area that needs the most work is helping students acknowledge that issues of power are ever-present when dealing with texts or debates: some voices circulate more easily than others; some voices carry more weight. While this is certainly a worthwhile area for future teaching, we found that assignment design had much to do with whether or not students engaged issues of power. For example, an essay exploring texts around free speech directly and deliberately addressed issues of power, while an analysis of the guitar subculture, which did engage a number of texts critically and well, did not. When we look at the median score for this question, 4 was the most common score, meaning, that when students are invited to explore issues of textual power, they tend to do it fairly well.

In terms of all three averages (mean, median and mode) we found that question 3, “How well do the writers integrate their ideas with those of others,” was the weakest score. And this is understandable, as a big change from high school to college writing is to ask students not only to report or parrot sources but to use them critically and creatively to create a project of their own. A good writer doesn’t just make the same argument that the sources make, he or she uses a variety of sources to ask new questions or make new arguments. This nuanced idea is important for all writers to learn, especially at the beginning of their college careers. For these reasons, we decided that going forward, our program will try to make more central the issues and questions related to how to help students integrate their own ideas with those of others.

Conclusions and Future Plans
We have taken several conclusions and plans away from this first assessment:

- Assessment, when tied to actual student work and teacher’s pedagogy, can be a rich and worthwhile experience.
- As a program, our shared outcomes help us define and focus our assessment projects.
- In terms of critical reading and writing, we are doing well by our students but could be doing even better.
- We will focus some workshops for instructors and events for students in the next three years on critical reading and writing, especially with regards to putting the writer’s ideas into conversation with those of others.
- We will incorporate discussion on critical reading and writing into our formal mentoring process. Mentors will set aside time in their conferences with TFs for conversation on how best to teach and to assess critical reading and writing, and on ways to design lesson plans and structure assignments to aid students in placing their ideas in conversation with others.
- We have extended an invitation to Dr. Joseph Harris to visit BC next year to work with FWS Staff around issues of helping students generously and productively put themselves into conversation with the ideas of other writers.

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2 Joseph Harris is an English professor at the University of Delaware—where he teaches academic writing, critical reading, creative nonfiction, and digital writing. He taught similar courses at Duke University and the University of Pittsburgh, and also worked with beginning teachers of writing. Most of his scholarship grows out of his work as a teacher. His 2006 *Rewriting* offers advice on how to make generous and
assertive use of the work of others in your own writing. And his 1997 *A Teaching Subject* is a history of the teaching of writing in American colleges. (An updated edition of this book came out in 2012.)