

Are students enrolled in WEC majors seeing changes in writing instruction?:

WEC & SERU collaborate for a baseline measurement of student perceptions of writing instruction at the University of Minnesota

WEC Assessment Update, December 2010

WEC

WRITING-ENRICHED
CURRICULUM

Teaching undergraduate students to write well has been a recognized priority at the University of Minnesota since 1991. With modest beginnings in 2007, the Writing-Enriched Curriculum (WEC) project began to pilot a writing program that invites participating units¹ to generate undergraduate Writing Plans. In these plans, departmental faculty groups describe discipline-relevant characteristics of writing and, further, identify writing abilities that graduating seniors should be able to demonstrate upon graduation. Today, 18 academic units, or 23 departments, participate in the WEC program. Preliminary assessments indicate that significant curricular and instructional changes have already occurred in WEC's pilot units. But the question remains—what are students' perceptions of the writing instruction they are receiving in their majors at the University of Minnesota? Do perceptions of students who take classes in WEC units differ² from those of students who do not?

To help us answer that question, the WEC program collaborated with the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) to include specific writing-related questions on the Student Experience in the Research University Survey (SERU).

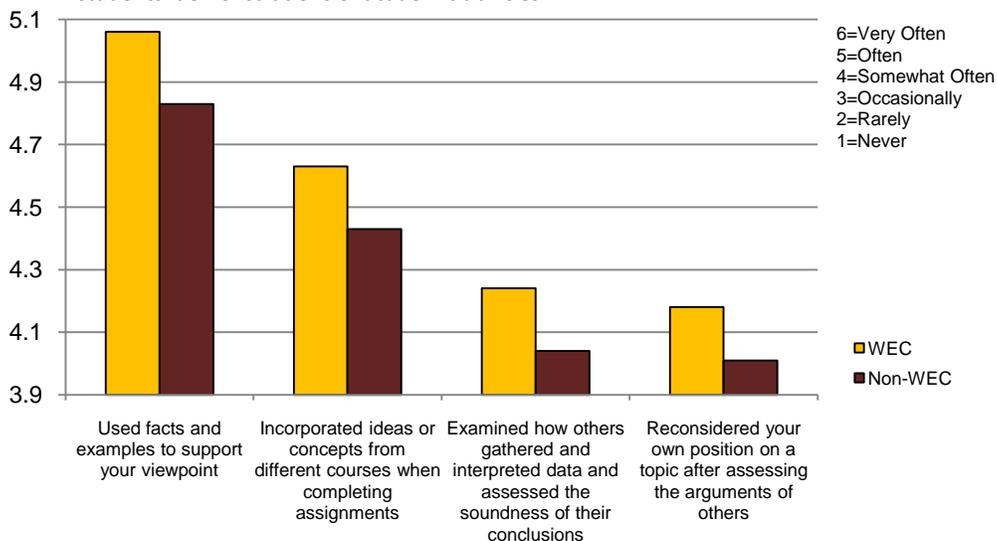
SERU offers a systematic environmental census scan of the undergraduate experience and an in-depth analysis of the varied types and levels of undergraduate student engagement in major public research universities. SERU researchers confirm that students' self-reported information, while an "indirect" measure, is one of the best indicators for assessing the value of the academic experience.³ The reliability of self-reported measures is high and generally considered to be a valid measure of real differences in learning when aggregated to compare the performance of groups.^{4,5} In spring 2010, 28,285 University of Minnesota undergraduate students were surveyed. Approximately 10,906 students responded to a series of questions (a 38.56% response rate). Of these respondents, 2,920 completed a "wildcard"⁴ module designed in part by WEC and OIR that asked students to reflect on their experiences with writing assignments in courses. Reported findings include results from students in both the whole sample set and the "wildcard" set.

Students were identified as WEC students if their academic major corresponded to one of the 13 WEC units in Cohorts 1-5. Additionally, WEC students were further separated into one of five cohorts based on the semester and year in which their academic unit began to implement WEC Undergraduate Writing Plans.

Students report relevance of writing to their majors

University of Minnesota undergraduate students across all disciplines typically use writing to demonstrate multiple academic abilities. Studies have examined the powerful relationship between writing and thinking based on an assumption that "a text reflects a mind at work."⁶ As a measure of this assertion, Figure 1 shows the frequency with which all students who completed the SERU survey reported engagement with four valued academic abilities: the use of facts and examples to support their viewpoint; the incorporation of ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments; the examination of how others gathered data, interpreted data, and assessed the soundness of their conclusions; and the reconsideration of their own position after assessing the arguments of others. WEC students report more frequent engagement with these abilities than do peers in non-participating units.

Figure 1: Comparison of average reported frequency of WEC and non-WEC students' demonstrations of academic abilities



¹Units" refers to departments or colleges. The number refers to its "Cohort," or when it began with WEC: African American & African Studies (5); Architecture (6); College of Biological Sciences (4); Construction Management (6); Design, Housing, & Apparel (2); Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior (3); Family Social Science (6); Geography (3); History (2); Horticultural Science (2); Kinesiology (5); Mechanical Engineering (1); Nursing (3); Philosophy (6); Physics (6); Political Science (1); Spanish and Portuguese Studies (3); Theatre Arts & Dance (4).

²Statistically significant differences between students enrolled in WEC majors, students enrolled in non-WEC majors, and within the WEC cohorts were analyzed using t-tests. Significant differences are reported at $p < .05$ in all instances.

³Thomson, G. & Douglass, J. A. (May 2009). "Decoding Learning Gains: Measuring Outcomes and the Pivotal Role of the Major and Student Backgrounds." *SERU Project and Consortium Research Paper*. University of California, Berkeley.

⁴Anaya, G. (1999). College impact on student learning: Comparing the use of self-reported gains, standardized test scores, and college grades. *Research in Higher Education*, 40, 499-526.

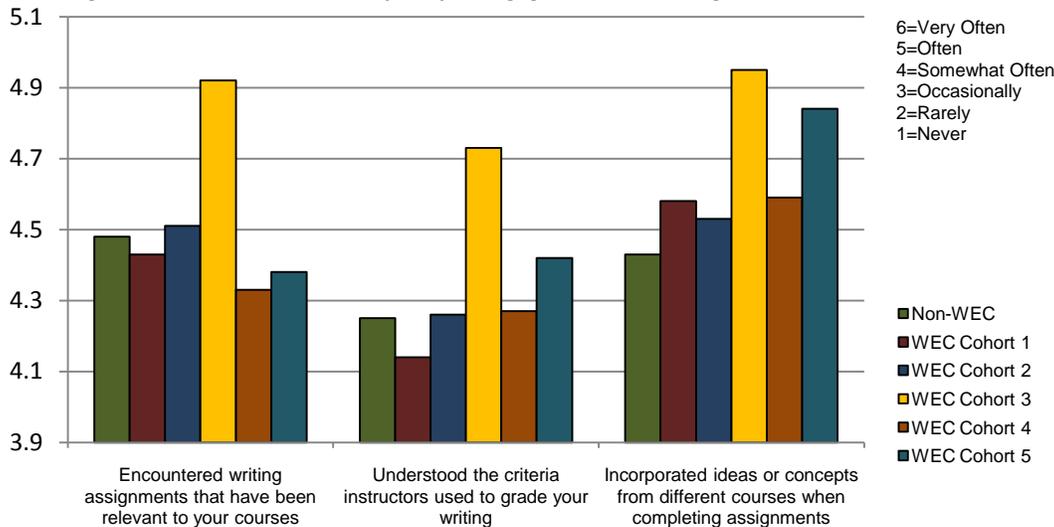
⁵Pace, C. R. (1985). The credibility of student self-reports. In *Resource Papers and Technical Reports. Research into Practice Project*. University of California, Los Angeles.

⁶Odell, L. (1999). "Assessing Thinking: Glimpsing a Mind at Work." In *Evaluating Writing: The Role of Teachers' Knowledge about Text, Learning, and Culture*. Ed. C. R. Cooper and L. Odell, 7-22. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

The WEC model gains strength over time

In 2008 the University’s Council on Liberal Education (CLE) re-affirmed the Howe report’s 1991⁷ recommendations that the University increase the amount of writing required of undergraduate students. Echoing their 1991 recommendations, the Council again encouraged a deepened alignment between writing and disciplinary values. This recommendation corresponded to the WEC pilot’s goals, and to the progress the project had already begun to make by collaborating with faculty members to infuse discipline-relevant writing instruction and assignments into undergraduate curricula. Prior to the start of the project’s third cohort, WEC conducted a programmatic assessment. Data collected from involved faculty members indicate that the model, which had evolved over time, was effective in providing them with the structure, support, and time necessary to make meaningful changes in their approaches to teaching with writing, and caused them to be optimistic that these changes are leading to improved student writing.

Figure 2: Cohort 3 students’ frequency of engagement with WEC goals



“The collaboration between OIR and WEC is a great example of the benefits of incorporating program assessment within the context of a larger central data collection. The SERU survey is flexible in terms of meeting the University’s data needs within a program and also more broadly across the campus.”

--Dr. Ronald Huesman, Associate Director of Institutional Research

Originally the WEC process involved only one meeting with department faculty groups. However, it became clear that expanding the model so that it included four brief but structured meetings would allow for expanded faculty involvement—engaging not only those who were already on-board, but also skeptics and naysayers—in the process of examining their collective expectations for student writing and of subsequently revising their approaches to writing instruction. These changes affected student experiences in anticipated ways. The SERU findings reported in Figure 2 illustrate significant differences between students in Cohort 3, students in other cohorts, and non-WEC students as they relate to WEC goals. The frequency with which Cohort 3 students report encountering relevant writing assignments and understanding the criteria used by instructors to grade their writing is higher than that reported by non-WEC students and by students in previous WEC cohorts. We anticipated that students in Cohorts 4 and 5 would report less frequent engagement with these activities, as shown in Figure 2, because in those later cohorts, faculty members have only begun to implement, or in some cases are still developing, Writing Plans. We expect to see gains in those cohorts in the future. We are encouraged by SERU results, and see them as an indicator of the honed model’s success.

⁷Council on Liberal Education. “A Liberal Education for the 1990’s and Beyond on the Twin Cities Campus of the University of Minnesota.” (1991). Regents of the University of Minnesota.

Future of WEC Assessment:

Spring and Summer 2011: WEC Assessment of student writing
 May 11, 2011: 2nd WEC Symposium, Coffman Union
 Spring 2012: OIR to administer the SERU “wildcard”

Look for the next Assessment Update, “What are University of Minnesota undergraduate students saying about writing?” in January 2011

For more information about SERU and the complete report on WEC:
www.oir.umn.edu/surveys
www.oir.umn.edu/static/surveyreports/seru/2010/writing-enriched-curriculum.pdf

For more information on the WEC project
 or to request a brochure, visit

www.wec.umn.edu

