

Evaluating the State of Written, Oral, and Digital Communication at UW:

A Report on 2018-2019 Activities and Future Goals

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Overview

The value of strong communication skills for professional and personal success is not in doubt; numerous studies¹ establish the value of oral, written, and digital/multimodal communication skills for students during and after their undergraduate experience. Studies² also find that students develop their communication skills through curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities. If UW takes seriously its strategic goal of “inspir[ing] students to pursue a productive, engaged and fulfilling life and prepar[ing] them to succeed in a sustainable global economy” (*Breaking Through: 2017-2022*), then the university must remain committed to nurturing a broad range of communication opportunities.

An **exciting sign of UW’s broad commitment to in-class writing** comes from 2018 National Survey of Student Engagement data, where both students and faculty report that there is a significant amount of writing assigned. Specifically, **student estimates suggested they were assigned an average of 90.7 pages of writing during the current academic year**—substantially more than the 74.2-page average reported by students at other regional public universities. (Further data from NSSE and FSSE indicate that there are gaps in the *types* of writing that students are asked to do, however: just 18% of upper-level students reported classroom peer-review experiences during the current academic year, for example; see NSSE, 2018.)

Goal-Driven Planning & Action

The emerging Communication Across the Curriculum (CxC) unit within the Ellbogen Center for Teaching & Learning takes a multi-stranded approach to fostering stronger communication activities on campus:

GOAL 1: *Provide substantial individualized support for writers across campus*

GOAL 2: *Support faculty as writers and instructors of writing (primarily through workshops and learning communities)*

GOAL 3: *Encourage research and inquiry into the impacts of communication-related activities at UW, including the assessment of UW’s required USP 2015 communication-intensive courses*

GOAL 4: *Foster a general “culture of writing and communication” on campus*

¹ See, e.g., Amidon & Blythe, 2008; Blythe et. al, 200; Beason, 2001; Darling & Dannels, 2003; Lauer & Brumberger, 2019; Morreale, Valenzano, & Bauer, 2017; Rainey, 2005.

² See, e.g., Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Tenzini, 2005; Peck et al., 2016; Stirling & Kerr, 2015; Tinto, 2012.

Goal 1: Provide substantial individualized support for writers across campus.

In AY18-19, the **UW Writing Center (UWWC)** continued to see increased impacts from a variety of changes it implemented in previous years. Specifically, UWWC **has increased accessibility by extending its operating hours, adding synchronous online consultations, and increasing its consultation length from 30 minutes to an hour.** Writers seem to appreciate these changes: **UWWC saw an increase in usage from approximately 1600 consultations in AY17-18 to approximately 1750 in AY18-19** (an increase of ~9% over last year's total).

We think it is a good sign that **about 40% of users made more than one visit to the Writing Center in Fall 18 and Spring 19;** we believe this percentage serves as an indicator that writers find our assistance helpful enough to return for subsequent feedback and guidance on their writing projects.

Additionally, we are proud to help support **students whose home language is other than English:** This group of writers **made up approximately 13.5% of users in AY18-19.** And, more than **10% of our consultations for AY18-19 focused on graduate-level writing projects with writers who identified a home language other than English.**³

The Writing Center additionally increased its visits to classrooms in AY18-19. It also provided drop-in consultation support during graduate student writing retreats, and it provided a number of in-house workshops as well. Informal feedback suggests that classroom workshops were considered quite valuable by the instructors who requested them.

As an additional point of pride, the Writing Center increased professional development opportunities for its undergraduate and graduate consultants; **undergraduate and graduate consultants attended or presented at this year's Colorado/Wyoming Writing Center Conference** in February. Additionally, **undergraduate consultant Lydia Mayer is conducting Summer 2019 research about science communication that will be presented at a Fall 2019 student research conference in the UK.**

Unfortunately, **UW Writing Center Director Matt Drollette is stepping away from this role to pursue other opportunities.** He was hugely influential in many important and successful changes to Writing Center operations in the past two years.

At present, the Oral Communication Center (directed by Beau Bingham) and Studio Coe (directed by Susan Schulz) are not housed within the Communication Across the Curriculum program. Importantly, however, they provide extensive individualized support for oral and digital communication activities: In AY18-19, **the Oral Communication Center provided 881 consultations and Studio Coe recorded 1592 users of its technologies and support for digital communication.** Additionally, an **assessment by Coe Library Research & Instruction shows that they provided 24 sessions in 2017-2018 COM courses,** most often focused on identifying

³ This way of measuring use by ESL writers differs from previous years, when percentages were based on number of *conferences* with ESL writers.

appropriate/disciplinary resources and databases, generating appropriate keywords, and evaluating sources. At the COM3 level, additional focuses on articulating research questions and plans were also common.

Writing Center goals for AY19-20 include:

1. Maintain **operating hours and overall consultation totals in line with those of the past 2 years**. National Writing Center scholarship does not provide clear targets for usage rates, but we aspire to consult with approximately 10% of the student body each year.
2. Initiate a **STEM satellite center pilot project** (in collaboration with STEP tutoring) in Spring 19. We hope that a satellite center, employing mostly students with upper-level or graduate expertise in science writing, can help us better support STEM-related writing projects. Historically many STEM students have visited the Writing Center for assistance on non-STEM writing projects, so we believe there is a gap to be filled.
3. Participate in the development and delivery of a series of **workshops and retreats focused on supporting graduate writers**, in collaboration with the Graduate Student Network, Office of Graduate Education, and English Language Center.

GOAL 2: Support faculty as writers and instructors of writing

Faculty development for writing instruction was focused on two major projects:

1. Facilitating an **article-discussion group focused on the use of communication activities to promote/deepen content learning**. This group had participants from a diverse set of programs, including soil sciences, management and marketing, life sciences, English, secondary education, fine arts, counselor development, and communication/journalism.

Here is one testimony of the value of the series:

I get so insulated into my own field and our own quirky ways of doing things. Hearing from others who are in different disciplines, working with students in a different developmental place was really helpful in backing up to think more about my teaching as a whole instead of just trends in my fields. It also challenged assumptions I have made about ways things "have to" be from observation of mentors or previous experience. It is so refreshing for me to connect outside of my own field sometimes. I have been really thinking about my own syllabi and assignments, and the purpose in why I am asking students to write in my courses, not just about outcomes, but what I hope they are gaining from the experience.

Other participants commented that the series was a “valuable experience thanks to both the selection of readings and facilitation the discussions,” was “well thought out and executed,” and that it “led me to more carefully consider the WHYs of how I design assignments.”

2. Facilitating a **book-discussion group, about Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision**. Colleagues from agriculture, business, and education, as well as from the English Language Center, engaged in discussion about how to better support graduate-level writers. One participant noted,

It was fascinating to witness how much current [graduate advisors] learned from the reading. I learned from them that they were very thankful for having been given this professional development opportunity and that they were eager to

apply it in different settings; first, in their personal writing and second, in their doctoral supervising in their departments. I was also impressed to learn that most of them wanted to share their newly gained insights with their colleagues in order to improve doctoral supervising and scholarly opportunities for all PhD students in their department/college.

Another participant commented, *“This was life changing for me (no hyperbole!).”*

Beyond these more intensive learning communities, faculty were also supported through a series of workshops, as well as individual consultations, related to instruction and assessment of COM courses. Additionally, the CxC director was invited to facilitate discussions about teaching and evaluating writing with graduate teaching assistants in Anthropology and with faculty in the Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources.

Faculty Development goals for AY19-20 include:

- Facilitating **at least two article-discussion-based faculty learning communities**, tentatively focused on the integration of text-based evidence in disciplinary communication and on providing effective feedback to students on their communication assignments.
- Offering **COM support workshops/discussions in Fall 2019**, based on feedback and requests from Spring 2019 COM assessment reports as well as from COM course renewal applications.
- Coordinating **COM-related panels for ECTL's Fall 2019 Thursday Teaching & Learning Presenter Series**.

GOAL 3: Encourage research and inquiry into the impacts of communication-related activities at UW.

The Communication Across the Curriculum program has supported and coordinated a variety of inquiry projects in AY18-19, including the following:

- **The first ever assessment of the USP 2015 COM courses.** The report “The State of COM: Results from Spring 2019 Assessment Projects” provides extensive program-level analysis of the types of projects undertaken, key lessons learned, and directions for future support and research. **Over 60 instructors participated in self-directed assessment projects.**
- **Analysis of a small-scale communication-support pilot project in the Haub School of Environment and Natural Resources (ENR).** Rhiannon Jakopak (an ENR graduate student and former Writing Center consultant) initiated this project, which involved advanced science graduate students providing writing feedback to undergraduate students in four Haub School courses. Feedback from instructors, the graduate consultants, and undergraduates was largely positive, and many student comments expressed a desire for more extensive engagement with the graduate consultant. The types of feedback that students found most helpful focused on global level writing issues (including overall logic/clarity of argument, evidence/detail, and appropriate tone) rather than sentence-level or grammatical errors.
- **Investigation of the value of Undergraduate Research and Inquiry participation** for students’ oral and written communication skills. Approximately 500 students participate in this Spring event, and 2018 marks the first year that planners have collected information about participant perceptions. Findings from surveys indicate that

participating students had consistently strong value for their experiences, including the impact those experiences had on developing their communication, research, and collaboration skills. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Students' perceptions about abilities and growth related to undergraduate research

Research process/design¹	Mean²	Variance
I can generate a question to guide my research or creative project	4.32	0.62
I can figure out what data/observations to collect and how to collect them	4.25	0.68
I can create explanations for the results of the study	4.32	0.65
I can use literature and reports (other resources) to guide my research	4.45	0.61
I can develop theories/hypotheses	4.38	0.63
I can analyze data and information for patterns	4.33	0.67
I can figure out the next steps in a research or creative project	4.26	0.68
Communication		
I can work collaboratively with others	4.47	0.65
This project improved my ability to establish the value and purpose of my written work	4.25	0.71
This project improved my ability to structure documents effectively	4.18	0.76
This project improved my ability to avoid errors of special importance to my field or discipline	4.16	0.78
This project improved my writing skills	4.14	0.80
This project improved my ability to integrate and cite evidence	4.13	0.75
1. Results based on surveys from approximately 300 students.		
2. Based on 5-point scale		

CxC Research & Inquiry goals for AY19-20 include:

- **Collect instructor materials and analyze purposes and audiences for communication assignments within Fall 2018 COM courses.** This research has the potential to contribute to and extend previous national research by composition scholar Dan Melzer (2011, 2014).
- **Provide stipends and guidance in support of an inquiry project initiated by Spring 19 article-discussion group participants.** This project will explore the impacts of differing audience types for written assignments in a set of several varied classes; this group hopes to test claims made by Bean (1996) and Britton et al. (1975) about the limitations of default/implicit “teacher-as-examiner” audiences for classroom writing.
- **Co-teach an Honors/English course that will engage undergraduate students in designing and pursuing research about the impacts of COM and FYS courses.** Participants from AY18-19 course (focused on FYS courses) have presented research on campus, nationally, and internationally. Undergraduates **Andrew Meyer, Terri Higgins, and Makayla Wheeler** and graduate student **Heather Webb** will attend the 2019 International Students as Partners Institute in Adelaide, South Australia, to help develop curricular and research ideas for the AY19-20 course.
- **Support self-directed inquiry**—by Writing Center consultants, Composition/Rhetoric and Communication/Journalism graduate students, COM faculty, etc.—**in the pursuit of scholarship of teaching and learning** related to impacts of written, oral, and digital communication activity.

GOAL 4: Foster a general “culture of writing and communication” on campus

Taking the view that real, lasting institutional change requires many individuals to reconceptualize what communication is and does (e.g., Bazerman, 2003), the Communication across the Curriculum program seeks ways to and recognize celebrate faculty as deeply

engaged writers, communicators, and teachers of communication activity. Key Communication across the Curriculum events in AY18-29 include:

- **Supporting the Academic Writing Fellows program in the College of Education**, designed to support new and established faculty in increasing quality, focus, and/or nature of their scholarly outputs. Partial data from participants in the first 2 years of this program are impressive: over 37 manuscripts accepted for publication, 23 presentations, 40 publications in process, and over \$2.6 million in grants awarded. Interviews and final reports from participants point towards meaningful change in their behavioral, emotional, social, and/or technical perspectives on writing.
- **Hosting the first COM Assignment Showcase** as an opportunity for faculty to learn about interesting and successful approaches to teaching oral, written, and digital communication. This year's showcase featured **Michelle Jarman** (with student presenter **Jess Fahlsing**), **Alyssa McElwain**, and **Elizabeth Minton**.

Goals for ongoing cultural change:

- **Integrate faculty development for communication into the ECTL's Teaching & Learning Certificate program**, to draw greater attention to the need for faculty and staff to understand the unique opportunities and complexities of incorporating writing and speaking into their courses.
- **Initiate expansion of the Academic Writing Fellows model**. Three years of successful cohorts in the College of Education supports the value of this model, and the Communication across the Curriculum hopes to plan and recruit for an AY2020-2021 interdisciplinary/cross-campus cohort.
- **Collaborate with and co-sponsor nationally recognized researchers** in composition, writing-across-the-curriculum, multimodality, linguistics, and literacy **to expand the campus community's understanding of writing and communication as scholarly and pedagogical activity**.
- **Attend the national Conference of Writing Program Administrators summer institute**, in order to gather ideas from leading scholars and writing program administrators about high-impact approaches to cultural change.
- **Engage a broad cross-section of campus community members in planning the future of CxC research and COM assessment**. Hopefully, Spring 2019 COM Assessment results will provide a springboard for forward-looking discussion: what do we know, and what do we want to know, about the nature of students' experience as communicator at UW and beyond?

Conclusion

Although the Communication across the Curriculum program is still an emerging unit within ECTL, this report demonstrates the impressive range of impacts that it has been able to achieve in its first year of existence. This report also points towards a substantial agenda for the coming year, one that is based on close attention to interactions with faculty, feedback from assessment reports, and national scholarship and debate.

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