

WEC: Developing student writers in all disciplines

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WEC Program overview

Since 2007, the University of Minnesota's pioneering [Writing-Enriched Curriculum Project](#) (WEC) has been providing an *intradisciplinary* complement to the institution's interdisciplinary writing across the curriculum programming. Need for this localized approach was articulated between 2001 and 2006 by faculty participating in the University's college-wide Faculty Writing Consultant program and by focus groups convened as part of the Provost's 2006 Strategic Positioning effort. Both programs documented evidence of confusion about the role of writing instruction in major programs, about the intended relationship between courses that were and were not designated writing-intensive (WI), and about the University's willingness to lend fiscal support to enhanced writing instruction. Participants in focus groups repeatedly voiced an unchallenged perception that writing instruction and content instruction constitute separate and frequently conflicting areas of instruction. The persistence of this perception and the confusion it triggered indicated that the University's unilateral approach to integrating relevant writing instruction into undergraduate programs by way of its WI course requirement was yielding uneven and limited results.

The WEC model addresses these roadblocks by bringing a flexible, faculty-driven approach directly into departmental offices. This model is based on the beliefs that (1) writing can be flexibly defined as an articulation of thinking, an act of choosing among an array of modes or forms, only some of which involve words; (2) writing ability is continually developed rather than mastered; (3) because writing is instrumental to learning, it follows that writing instruction is the shared responsibility of content experts in all academic disciplines; (4) the incorporation of writing into content instruction can be most meaningfully achieved when those who teach are provided multiple opportunities to articulate, interrogate, and communicate their assumptions and expectations; (5) infusing writing instruction into their teaching requires support. Thus, WEC engages local faculty groups in a longitudinal and recursive process of generating, implementing, and assessing Undergraduate Writing Plans, plans in which they identify relevant writing objectives, reconceptualize ways in which these writing abilities can be staged and supported within their curricula, and devise instructional supports for faculty and students in their majors. In 2012, at the conclusion of a five-year grant-funded pilot process, WEC was institutionalized by the Office of Undergraduate Education and is currently working within 60 departments and programs offering 104 undergraduate major programs. WEC enrolls five additional undergraduate units (departments, schools, or colleges) each year. Ultimately, the program will ensure that all students who graduate from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities will do so with "writing-enriched" degrees.

The WEC process

WEC offers the University of Minnesota's undergraduate faculty a flexible and recursive process resulting in the ongoing generation, implementation, and assessment of context-specific Undergraduate Writing Plans. In these five-section plans faculty articulate relevant writing outcomes and strategies for achieving those outcomes (see Figure 1). At the center of the WEC process is a series of facilitated faculty dialogues that allow departmental faculty groups to think collaboratively and strategically with specialists in writing pedagogy and assessment about the effective integration of writing into their undergraduate curricula.

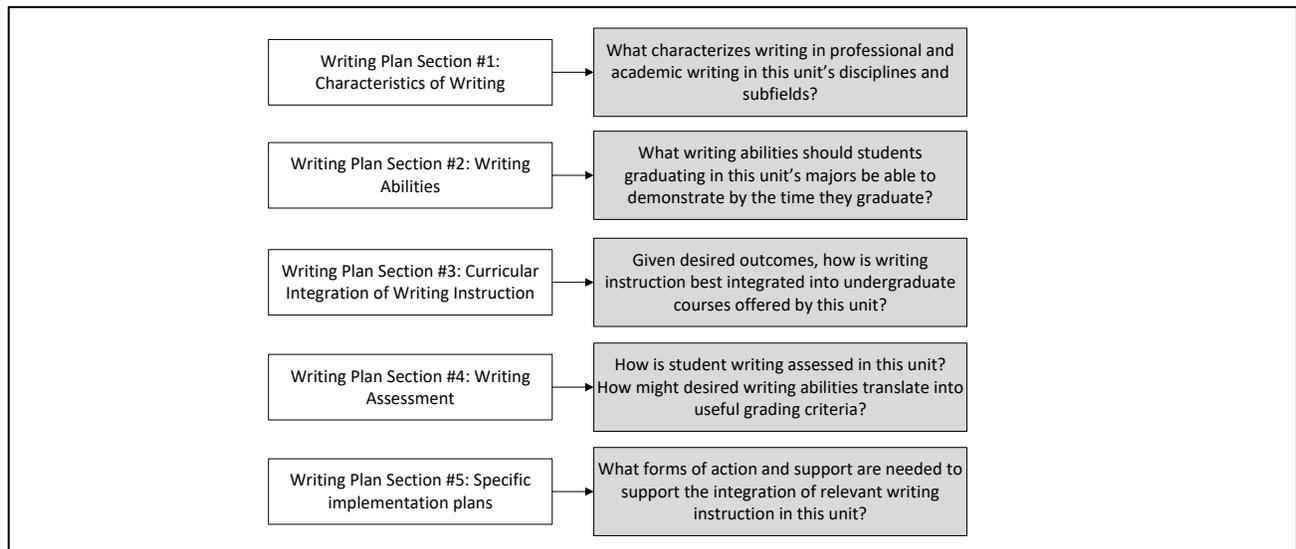


Figure 1. Undergraduate Writing Plans: Section template with focal questions

To instigate and ground constructive faculty discussion throughout the WEC process, WEC team members regularly present faculty with various forms of locally collected data related to writing and writing instruction. To prompt faculty discussion of relevant graduation-level writing abilities, the team then shares results from an online survey in which unit faculty, students, and external affiliates rank discipline-relevant writing abilities and reflect on aspects of the program's writing instruction. To prompt discussion of the ways that writing and writing instruction can optimally sequence into the program's curriculum, the team presents faculty with comprehensive visual representations (maps, matrices, flow-charts) of key courses comprising the curricula. To ensure the articulation of relevant and viable grading criteria, the team presents faculty groups with samples of writing collected from units' capstone-level courses. Finally, to ensure that various faculty perspectives voiced in meetings are incorporated into the Writing Plan, the team records all meetings and, subsequent to each meeting, circulates thorough meeting summaries. Ultimately, equipped with meeting summaries, survey data, curricular maps, and writing samples, Faculty Liaisons draft first, second, or third edition Writing Plans. From there, drafts circulate intra-departmentally. Faculty-vetted Writing Plans are ultimately granted approval by the Campus Writing Board, a subcommittee of the Faculty Senate and fiscal requests are approved by the Provost's Office. Over the course of 8+ years, unit faculty produce at least three editions of their Writing Plans (see Figure 2).

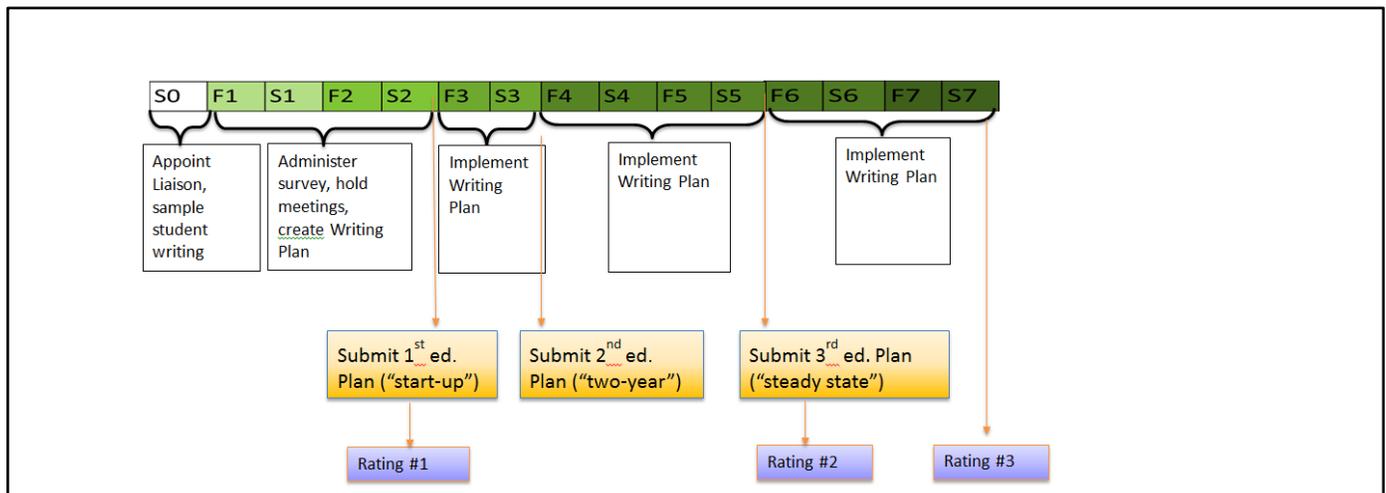


Figure 2: Timeline showing the typical development, implementation and assessment of Writing Plans over the course of eight academic years.

In addition to assessment measures that supply faculty with data to be interpreted and discussed as they create their first edition Writing Plan, and in addition to the customized assessments each unit is obliged to conduct in order to measure effects of customized instructional support efforts, WEC regularly conducts assessments that address the following two questions:

1. What effect does creating, implementing, and assessing Writing Plans have upon writing instruction in WEC units?
2. What impact does creating, implementing, and assessing Writing Plans have upon student writing in WEC units?

Assessment data are gathered from student evaluations of teaching, the Student Experience in Research Universities survey (SERU), an annual survey of WEC Faculty Liaisons, and iterative Writing Plan review conducted by members of the Campus Writing Board (a subcommittee of the University Senate) and the Office of Undergraduate Education.¹ Additionally, longitudinal panel rating of student writing is conducted every three years for each unit involved in the WEC program. This rating process involves a panel of raters, gathered from inside and outside the department) who evaluate the sufficiency of graduation-level student texts against a set of faculty generated criteria. Results of triennial rating sessions are subsequently interpreted and discussed by unit faculty and typically trigger next-stage implementation planning. In WEC units where comparative data sets have been generated, this assessment reveals increased rates at which student writing is meeting faculty expectations.

In a nutshell, the WEC model equips undergraduate faculty with an elective, funded, and faculty-driven but externally partnered method for critically reflecting on assumptions related to the kinds of writing they assign students in their undergraduate curricula and for intentionally implementing and assessing context-specific activities warranted by these reflective processes. The model, designed to capitalize on reflection and to divert resistance, has resulted in sustainable changes in the ways that writing and writing instruction are conducted at our research university. In units where multiple ratings of student writing have been conducted improvement has been documented.

To date, 80 faculty-authored Writing Plans (a figure combining first, second, and third editions) have been approved by the Campus Writing Board, and the Office of Undergraduate Education has invested over \$1.5 million in funding faculty-generated implementation activities. As of Fall 2016, 16,829 undergraduate students have declared majors in WEC units. Based on the success of our model, the first of its kind, several peer institutions have begun to develop site-specific WEC programs.