

RFP-006: Student Services

The Effectiveness of the Writing Proficiency Assessment (WPA) in Improving Student Writing Skills at Huron University College

Prepared by Theresa A. Hyland, Grace Howell and Zheng Zhang, Huron University College
for the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

Report 2



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1 Yonge Street, Suite 2402

Toronto, ON Canada

M5E 1E5

Phone: (416) 212-3893

Fax: (416) 212-3899

Web: www.heqco.ca

E-mail: info@heqco.ca

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) issued a Request for Proposals in June 2008 that focused on The Role of Student Services in Support of Access, Retention and Quality. The goal was to provide funding to institutions to allow them to evaluate the effectiveness of existing student services projects or programs designed to enhance student access, retention and academic success, and to identify best practices and innovative techniques that might be useful for other postsecondary institutions. Twenty-eight proposals from Ontario colleges and universities were submitted, and 15 projects were subsequently approved for funding by HEQCO.

While there was some overlap, the projects were roughly divided into those that focused on the general student population to deal with overall first-year transition challenges; those that focused on improving the engagement, transition and retention of targeted populations of “at-risk” students; and those that focused on courses and programs that were considered to be “at-risk” (e.g. high rates of Failure and Withdrawal) for students enrolled.

This final report is part of the “Student Services” series, and is one of four being released in June 2010. Together, these and the subsequent reports from this series will help better inform student success strategies with evidence-based assessments.

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Executive Summary

Full-time enrolment in Ontario universities in 2008-2009 rose to nearly 364,000 students in 2009 (HEQCO, 2010). One of the characteristics of the expanded postsecondary population is the greater range of skills and abilities that these young people present upon entry to university.

Along with many other postsecondary institutions, Huron University College has developed a program of writing support services for undergraduate students. The Writing Proficiency Assessment (WPA), that all first-year students must take early in September of their first year of undergraduate study, is one of those services. The WPA requires students to complete two tasks: (1) a summary of a 1,200 word reading and (2) an essay discussing one of the issues raised in the reading. While this assessment has been analysed for internal validity, it has not been examined for its fairness to the constituents being assessed and its relevance, both real and perceived, to their needs. Our study measured student engagement by collecting and examining the following:

- (1) The writing of a sample group of graduating students (WPA 2) and their writing from the first-year assessment (WPA 1);
- (2) Data about students' performance in writing in their essay courses, and
- (3) Interviews with graduating students about the measures they took throughout their undergraduate careers to improve their writing, and their perceptions of the role that the Writing Proficiency Assessment played in promoting self-efficacy.

Key findings of the study include the following:

- (1) A significant increase in Overall Scores between WPA 1 and WPA 2;
- (2) A strong correlation between the average scores for essays in content courses and the overall scores achieved on the WPA 2;
- (3) A perception, by most students interviewed, that the WPA was a useful exercise; and
- (4) The assertion by a majority of the students (55.6 per cent) that consultation with professors is a key strategy for improving writing over the course of their university careers.

This study has cast light on the legitimacy of the WPA as a measure of students' academic writing skills and on the methods that students use to engage in improving academic writing skills. Given the correlation between performance on the WPA 2 and essay scores in content areas, and students' evident need for multiple entries into the academic discourse community, this study reinforces our belief that writing services are a key component in helping students participate in the university's culture of academic writing.

I. Introduction

The province of Ontario has made significant advances in postsecondary participation. Full-time enrolment in Ontario universities in 2008-2009 was nearly 364,000 students, compared to 330,374 in 2004-2005 (HEQCO, 2010). While this increase represents a positive trend toward a more highly educated workforce, Dr. Ken Norrie, Vice-President of Research for HEQCO cautions that "[m]ore work is necessary in order to develop a strategy to accommodate expanding enrolment and to secure adequate funding for the future needs of the system while maintaining the high level of quality that Ontarians expect of their postsecondary education system" (HEQCO, 2010).

One of the characteristics of the increased postsecondary population is the greater range of skills and abilities that these young people present upon entry to university, and writing ability appears to be one skill that is most variable among this population. Scholar Charles MacArthur notes that "the National Assessment of Education Progress rated only...24 per cent of twelfth-grade students as proficient [in writing]" (MacArthur, 2009). There is clearly a gap between the proficiency level of first-year university students, and the expectations of postsecondary institutions. Researcher Jennifer Clary-Lemon (2009) cited Russ Hunt, who has noted that there has been an assumption that "postsecondary students already know how to write, or should, and if they don't, well it's up to them to learn" (p. 95). This view is changing, especially in light of the skill set presented by the increased numbers of postsecondary students. If the goal of postsecondary institutions is now to attract, retain and support greater numbers of students who come to university with a wider range of writing skills, it is critical to establish and evaluate effective supports for the development of those skills.

Context of the Research Project

The research was conducted at Huron University College, which is a liberal arts college affiliated with the University of Western Ontario. The college is divided into two Faculties: the Faculty of Theology and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. The Faculty of Theology, which is the founding faculty, grants a Bachelor of Arts degree in Theological Studies, a Master of Divinity degree and a Master of Theology degree. There are approximately 120 students in this faculty pursuing these degrees. The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences has approximately 1,000 students, all undergraduates, pursuing degrees in Psychology, Philosophy, Economics, English, French, Global Studies, Political Science, or Business. Approximately 12 per cent (120) are international students; the majority of these are from mainland China, but relatively large numbers also come from the United States, the Caribbean and the Middle East. India, Pakistan, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Somalia, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda are also well represented in this population. There are approximately 12 exchange students each year who come for one half term or one full term to study at the college. A variety of accommodations are made for these students, as they will not actually receive a degree from Huron University College.

Along with many other postsecondary institutions (Jones, 2001), Huron University College has developed a program of writing support services for its undergraduate students. The Writing Proficiency Assessment (WPA) test was instituted at Huron in 1998. All first-year students must take the WPA early in September of their first year of undergraduate study. The purpose of the assessment is three-fold:

- (1) To impress upon students the importance of academic writing to their success in undergraduate studies;
- (2) To give students salient feedback in their first term as to their own strengths and weaknesses in academic writing before they hand in assignments in their courses; and
- (3) To encourage students to seek help with their academic writing where weaknesses exist.

The assessment requires student to complete two tasks: (1) a summary that is written in response to a 1,200 word general reading and (2) an essay discussing one of the issues raised in the reading. These readings are accessible to all students in the college; they are not poems or short stories, but rather they are general articles that could be found in popular magazines or newspapers. The written work is assessed according to benchmarked and Likert-scaled criteria to score both the summary and the essay, and an Error Checklist that records the number of grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, sentence structure and paragraph structure errors. The Overall Score is a benchmarked scale out of a possible 6 points, where a score of 6 indicates no major or minor flaws in the three areas assessed, and a score of 1 indicates major flaws in all three areas of the assessment. The differences between major and minor flaws are also indicated in the Key to Overall Scores For examples of the benchmark descriptors, Key to the Overall Score and the marking sheets, please see Appendix A5.

Feedback from first-year performance on the assessment encouraged the administration at Huron University College to develop resources to help students strengthen their writing skills. A Writing Skills Centre was established, along with three first-year credit courses in writing: two for international students and one for Canadian students. These resources proved to be very popular with the students, as indicated by past participation numbers and survey comments collected since 2004.

An additional purpose of the assessment was to examine the "value-added" effect on students' expertise in writing that should be apparent upon completion of their undergraduate degree. For several years, this particular evaluation (WPA 2) occurred by requiring students to take the assessment a second time, in January of their graduating year. Correlational analyses were then performed to determine if there were identifiable ways in which students' writing had improved over the course of students' undergraduate careers. This second WPA was discontinued after six years, and the resources were devoted to the writing support services.

The Research Question

To date, it has been assumed that the Writing Proficiency Assessment assists students in understanding the features of good academic writing, and in seeking help with writing

improvement from faculty, from the Writing Skills Centre, or from the credit-based writing classes. While this was the intended effect of the Writing Proficiency Assessment, we had never evaluated the actual effect of the assessment on students' engagement with writing. The question we asked for this research was: What is the effect, both real and perceived, of the Writing Proficiency Assessment on student engagement with writing across the curriculum at a liberal arts college?

We proposed to measure student engagement with writing in three ways: (1) by examining performance on the WPA 2 of a sample group of graduating students and comparing it to their performance on the WPA 1; (2) by collecting data about students' performance in writing in their essay courses; and (3) by interviewing graduating students about the measures they took throughout their undergraduate careers to improve their writing, and their perceptions of the role that the Writing Proficiency Assessment played in promoting self-efficacy.

Literature Review

Assessing Writing Proficiency

Attempts to assess writing proficiency raised fundamental considerations about the construct validity of writing assessments. Cumming (1996) argued that construct validity is "agreed upon as the single, fundamental principle that subsumes various other aspects of validation" (p. 5). He cited Messick's (1989) "progressive matrix" of construct validation in which "the evidential and consequential bases of construct validity have important implications for test interpretations and test use" (p. 6). Evidential validity meant "a link between the content of the tasks and the defined domain about which inferences are to be made" and consequential validity meant the "functional impact of assessments on social systems and values" (Cumming p. 6). Kunnan (2000) cited the "Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education" to define fairness in assessment practices as validity, access and justice. The code demands that test developers "investigate differential test performances and ensure construct-irrelevant factors are not being assessed" (Kunnan, 2000, p. 2). For our purposes, the importance of this research on assessment is that we must examine whether the assessment is both fair to the constituents being assessed and relevant to their needs. Such relevance must be both real (i.e., connected to the projects they do within the academic community) and perceived (i.e., construed as relevant by the students themselves).

The format of a writing proficiency assessment may have an impact on how students perform on it. In an overview of writing assessment research, Cumming (1997) argued that brief, timed written texts may not give an accurate indication of student proficiency in writing (p. 56). He argued that the integration of writing with reading and listening materials for academic assessment tasks and the use of multiple writing tasks, increase the construct validity of these tests because they allow raters of writing proficiency to make more informed judgments about student ability. Reading prompts can enhance writing by providing ideas and supporting examples of issues, background knowledge about a topic, enriched vocabulary, examples of complex sentence structures, and organizational models for students to use in their writing (p. 53). Weigle (2004, p. 1) also asserted that a reading prompt allowed all students to show their

proficiency in writing. When the Georgia State Test of English Proficiency (GSTEP) that uses reading prompts for the writing tasks replaced the Alternate Regents Essay Test (ARET) that used only instructional prompts for the writing tasks assessment, the passing rates rose from 75 per cent to 90 per cent regardless of students' topic choices. On the WPA, topic choice is determined by the assessors and not by the students, so this factor may have an impact on the evidential validity of the writing assessment.

Pemberton (2003) argued that because there are so many variables involved in any student's improvement in writing, assessing the growth of students' self-efficacy beliefs is the best way for universities, and writing skills resource staff in particular, to provide evidence of the link between writing improvement activities and students' improvement in writing. Bell (2000) urged a regular and rigorous program of evaluation of writing services by choosing a method, or methods, that provide valid and meaningful information about the effectiveness of the services offered.

While the Writing Proficiency Assessment provides a summative evaluation of students' abilities at the time of writing the report, formative methods, such as responses to questionnaires and open-ended interviews, may be the best way of providing insight into students' perceptions of their evolving abilities as writers. Not only are students better able to assess their own growth as writers, but they are quite able to identify some of the contributing factors to that development, such as first-year assessments, the availability and quality of writing skills services and other influences on writing improvement across the curriculum.

Contributing Factors in Writing Improvement

The socio-cultural theory perspective (SCT) and its key notions have been enthusiastically extended to the field of writing and literacy research (e.g., Ball, 2006; Pérez, 1998; Currie & Cray, 2004). After examining 50 studies based on writing in culturally diverse contexts, Ball (2006) found that the most commonly used theoretical framework in pertinent studies is related to the impact of the social context on writing practices and writing development. The use of socio-cultural, socio-cognitive, socio-linguistic, and social-constructivist frameworks is dominant in 50 studies based on writing in culturally diverse contexts that Ball examined. These studies acknowledged “the influence of an individual’s prior experiences, values, beliefs, and context on what and how students learn” (p. 295).

There are several key concepts derived from socio-cultural theory that are directly relevant to our research study. The first is Vygotsky’s concept of mediation (Lei, 2008; Barnard & Campbell, 2005). Human beings appropriate cultural tools to reconstruct the meanings and functions of the tools through interaction and participation. Emphasis on interaction and participation in the writing process is characteristic of the more recent trends in composition research. Riazi’s (1997) research found that “production of the texts required[s] extensive interaction between the individual’s cognitive processes and social/contextual factors in different ways” (p. 105). Meng (1999) also argued that the interactive approach to writing research integrates cognitive and social aspects of writing, together with textual dimensions. Prior (2006) highlighted several essential features of writing that are mediated. First, written texts are not autonomous but are not far removed from their socio-historic origins. Second, writing is by no means a “private act”, but rather a “distributed and mediated means” (p. 58) and is “collaborative, involving divisions of labor and forms of co-authorship” (p. 58). Barnard and

Campbell's study (2005) gave a good example of writing as a learning activity which involves the co-construction of texts by students and tutors working together.

Other-regulation is another notion that is key to SCT approaches to writing, especially since it is closely related to the concepts of mediation, scaffolding and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Other-regulation "includes implicit and explicit mediation by parents, siblings, peers, coaches, teachers, and so on" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007, p. 204). Englert, Mariage, and Dunsmore (2006) explained that "ZPD reflects the difference in the level attained by students when they write with access to mediational tools and or in collaboration with more knowledgeable others, and the level attained when they write independently, without access to mediational tools or agents" (p. 214). Scaffolding represents "the active supports that the capable peer provides through a series of critical questions for example, and which are gradually withdrawn or replaced by the learner's own internalized strategy" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86); in this case it would be a series of questions that are aligned with the writer's own goals for solving the individual problems with the writing task at hand.

Hidi and Boscolo (2006) contended that writing also requires self-regulation. Self-regulation refers to the ability to accomplish activities with minimal or no external support. A self-regulated writer can "successfully manage the complexity of writing" and can use "self-initiated thoughts, feelings, and actions ... to attain various literary goals, which include improving their writing skills, and to enhance the quality of the text they create" (p. 150). In terms of self-regulation, Hidi and Boscolo referred to learners' motivation. Despite the contested notions of self-regulation situated in different theoretical perspectives, they contended that "all agree that self-regulated students are not only metacognitively and behaviorally active, but also motivationally active in attaining their learning goals" (p. 150). The higher the writers' competence in using strategies independently, the more efficacious the writers feel. Challenging the traditional image of learners as "isolated individuals who grapple for higher mental ground separated from the cultural institutions and historical conditions in which they learn" (Donato, 2000, p. 46). Donato saw learners as active individuals who transform the world rather than conform to it. In the socio-cultural context, learners actively "invest their goals, actions, cultural background, and beliefs (i.e., their agency) into tasks, and thus, transform them" (p. 44).

Englert, Mariage, and Dunsmore (2006) highlighted the importance of creating and facilitating participation in communities of practice by using socio-cultural theory. They accentuated "an interactive and collaborative discourse... between the teacher and student participants" (p. 209). Participating in such a discourse or community, students acquire language proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing and gain "opportunities to engage with others through written language and to receive feedback on one's written communications from teachers and peers" (p. 214). As Prior (2006) asserted, writing is more than just a means of communication; it participates in "making particular kinds of people, institutions, and cultures" (p. 58).

Giltrow (2002) drew attention to the variability of disciplinary genres of academic writing and attached importance to scholarly characteristics and attitudes presented in academic writing of different disciplines. She argued that despite some merits displayed in students' essays, they often fail to "speak to an academic audience, or enter into the discourse of the discipline" and their "way of speaking locates it out of earshot of scholarly interests" (p. 9).

The literature on the application of socio-cultural theory to the fields of writing instruction and writing research has illuminated the data collection and analysis undertaken in this study, as well as the interpretation of this current research. Our research explored the socio-cultural impact of the Writing Proficiency Assessment and the writing services at Huron University College. We specifically asked questions pertaining to how WPA and relevant writing services initiated students into the new discourse community, informed students of self-directed and other-directed strategies to develop their writing proficiency, and thus enabled their smooth transition from secondary school writing to university-level academic writing.

The Study

We developed both quantitative and qualitative measurements to explore the effect, both real and perceived, of the Writing Proficiency Assessment on student engagement with writing across the curriculum at a liberal arts college. The study assessed the ability of the WPA to measure writing skills and its usefulness in encouraging their development through the "washback" effects of the feedback given to students about their skills (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996). The research was facilitated by the fact that data from the first-year assessments was available; hence, we envisaged a one- to two-year time frame for the research even though it is actually based on data from the past four years. While historical analysis over the past 10 years has shown that there are statistically significant relationships between students' performance on the summary and essay sections of the WPA assessment and the overall score, there has never been a comparison between students' performance on the assessment and their performance in discipline-specific writing. The questions on the student information sheet about their performance on essay courses at the College gave us information about the relevance of the WPA assessment scores when compared to academic performance in the disciplines, and could be used as a measure of the construct validity of the assessment. Improvement of writing skills was measured using the following sources of data: The Writing Proficiency Assessment (WPA) as a pre- and post-test measure of writing improvement between the first and fourth years of study; Self-reported data concerning students' performance in writing in their undergraduate essay courses.

The literature shows that when students engage with the topic of a reading, they perform better on the subsequent writing task (Cumming, 1997). Lack of engagement with the topic may mean that students lack engagement with the whole process of writing proficiency. Furthermore, if students do not perceive a relationship between feedback from the WPA and their own efforts to strengthen writing skills, then the effect of the WPA on student engagement will be minimal. Five questions concerning students' perceptions of the relevance and effectiveness of the Writing Proficiency Assessment were included on the Student Information Sheet (see Appendix A3). The hand-written survey responses were enhanced with follow-up oral interview information concerning students' self-concept as writers, the impact of the WPA on their writing development and other strategies students used to improve writing ability over the course of their university careers.

II. General Methodology and Procedures

This research study was based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data gathering and analysis techniques which were applied to the central research questions concerning the impact of the WPA on student writing improvement at Huron University College. This section of the report provides an overview of the specific methods and procedures used in each stage of the investigation. Relevant research instruments have been included in this report as separate appendices.

Ethical Review

All materials, and the method and purpose of the research project, were given to the Huron University College Ethics Committee for approval in November 2008. Approval was received in early December 2008.

Participants

All students, both international and domestic, who are in the first year of a degree program at Huron University College must take the Writing Proficiency Assessment. This is a low-stakes assessment of the writing skills that students possess upon entry to the college. Through the WPA, they receive information about their writing performance, but they are free to either ignore this information or to take steps to improve their writing skills. Students in their graduating year are also given the opportunity, on a voluntary basis, to take the assessment once more. An Overall Score of 4, 5 or 6 (the highest score) on the second assessment will earn these students a Certificate of Proficiency in Writing that is signed by an official of the College, and may be used by the students as proof of their ability to write coherent, protracted prose in response to an issue.

Students from the graduating classes of 2009 and 2010 were recruited for this study, and students from all programs of study were eligible to participate. A total of 29 eligible students completed the study. Nineteen of the participants, or 65.5 per cent were female, and ten or 34.5 per cent were male. English was the first language of 22 students, or 81.5 per cent of the group.

Materials

Copies of all forms used in the study are available in Appendix A. Those students who indicated an interest in the study were given a Letter of Information about the project along with an Informed Consent Form. This form was signed by the students and returned to the researchers prior to the commencement of data collection. Those who returned a signed Informed Consent Form also completed the Student Information Sheet. This form allowed the researchers to collect the following: data about each student's program of study; the number of essay courses and essays completed; grades received on the top five essays written; reactions to the first-year

WPA, and an indication of primary influences on the improvement of writing skills over the past four years of university. The Writing Proficiency Assessment (WPA 2) was then completed by all participants. The Assessment was graded using the Writing Proficiency Student Performance Summary Form. Participants were invited to be interviewed individually, at which time they were asked the questions on the Interview Form.

Design and Procedure

Recruitment of Volunteers:

Participants were recruited for the study at the commencement of the final semester of the 2008-2009 and in the first semester of the 2009-2010 academic years via email notices, posters displayed around the college, and through verbal announcements given in all classes. An information session about the project was scheduled in mid-January. Students' Council members were informed of the project, and they were asked to assist with the recruitment of volunteers. There were two incentives: students who scored a 4 or higher (out of 6) on the WPA received a Certificate of Proficiency in Writing, and a \$25 stipend was offered to all volunteers. Students were again recruited in September 2009 through the use of posters, email notices, and verbal announcements in class.

The Student Information Sheet:

Volunteers who wrote the WPA were first asked to read the Information Letter and sign the Volunteer Consent Forms. They were then asked to complete the Student Information Sheet.

The Writing Proficiency Assessment:

Student participants graduating in 2009 wrote the assessment at a Saturday morning session in late January 2009. Those who were unable to attend, or who volunteered after this session, completed the assessment in the Writing Skills Centre while observing the same two-hour time restriction. Students who wrote the assessment in September or October 2009 all wrote at their own convenience, but under the same two-hour time restrictions and in the Writing Skills Centre. The reading used for both sets of students was "Teaching the iGeneration" by Ken Hunt.

The Interview:

When the WPA assessment was completed, arrangements were made to meet with a trained interviewer who was not a member of the Writing Skills Centre staff. The interviewer was given a set of questions to use as a guideline for the interviews. The students' perceptions of how they developed their writing skills were elicited by interviewing them about the following: the role that the WPA played in promoting their awareness of how to improve their writing, and the measures they took throughout their undergraduate careers to improve their writing. Upon completion of all components of the study, students received the \$25 stipend. They also received a copy of the WPA Performance Summary Form which contained scores and comments on their writing performance.

Analysis

Student Information Sheet:

Responses were coded and entered into a database using SPSS v18.0 software.

Writing Proficiency Assessment:

The relationship between the scores on the first-year writing proficiency assessment and the results from the students' fourth-year assessments was determined through the use of one-tailed t-tests. These tests were performed on the Overall Scores, the Grammar Scores, the Summary Scores and the Essay Scores.

Essay Scores from Courses Taken:

Grades that students reported were averaged and coded into four range categories: 60-69.9; 70-79.9; 80-89.9 and 90-100. These ranges were then compared to the Overall WPA performance scores ranging from 1-6. This comparison was made primarily to determine the strength of the relationship between the students' reported grades, and their actual performance on the WPA. The significance of the relationship between essay scores and fourth-year WPA performance was calculated using a two-tailed Pearson Coefficient. The more stringent test of correlation was used to allow for a possible negative relationship between essay grades and scores on the WPA. Similar calculations were then completed for the summary and essay scores on the WPA, along with content-essay scores and grammar scores.

Interviews:

To facilitate discussion, the interview questions were organized generally around three dimensions of the development of writing skill:

- awareness of writing skills at both the personal and the academic level;
- engagement with writing development activities, and
- developing a culture or continuum of writing within various learning communities.

The interviews were conducted by a non-student staff member of the Writing Skills Centre at the University of Western Ontario; this centre is in no way connected to the Writing Skills Centre at Huron University College.

Qualitative Interview Data:

Three coding categories were developed for these responses with reference to socio-cultural principles of learned behaviours: factors contributing to a developing awareness of writing skill and skill requirements; strategies employed that reflect self-regulation and other-regulation in engaging with writing development activities; and factors that helped students to participate in developing a culture of writing as a component of current and future learning. See Appendix B for definitions and descriptions of these categories. Response statements contained in each interview were coded independently by two members of the research team, who negotiated to consensus on the coding of 90 per cent of the tapescripts. The responses and corresponding codes were compiled in a database using the Atlas.ti Version 5.01 qualitative software analysis program. These responses were then compiled into tables and analysed by the two coders.

III. The Writing Proficiency Assessment: Quantitative Analysis

Student Participation

There were 29 participants in total. This figure is somewhat lower than the anticipated 100 participants, and those who volunteered were not representative of the total population of graduating students in terms of gender or program of study. The participation rates by percentage in Table 1 reveal the disparity in these areas. Although there were 29 participants originally, not all of the datasets were complete; two students did not return the Student Information Sheet by the end of the study.

Table 1. Summary of Student Participation by Gender, First Language, and Program of Study

Descriptor	Detail	Study participants 2009-2010 (N = 27)		Total graduating class 2009-20101 (N = 202)	
		#	%	#	%
Gender	Female	18	66.7	98	48.5
	Male	9	33.3	104	51.5
First Language	English	21	80.8	169	83.4
	Chinese	3	11.5	21	10.7
	Other	2	7.7	12	5.9
Program of Study	English	7	25.9	18	8.9
	History	5	18.5	20	9.9
	Global Studies	4	14.8	20	9.9
	Political Science	3	11.2	29	14.3
	Economics	2	7.4	16	7.9
	BMOS	2	7.4	45	22.3
	Philosophy	2	7.4	19	9.4
	French	1	3.7	4	2.1
	Theology	1	3.7	11	5.4
	Psychology	0	-	20	9.9
	Other/undeclared	0	-	0	-

¹Numbers of female and male students, and Theology student numbers are actual; numbers in the Program of Study have been extrapolated as a proportion of the total numbers of students registered at Huron University College in 2009.

Four of the 27 students were unwilling or unable to schedule an interview, and it was discovered that five students had not completed the first-year Writing Proficiency Assessment because they had transferred to Huron University College after their first year of study. Of those who had completed the first-year WPA, two of these students had submitted only one of the two components of the assessment instrument. Table 2 shows the number of remaining participants for each component of the study, and for whom data was available for analysis.

Table 2. Summary of Student Participation by Data Collection Method

	Gender	Complete WPA1	Complete WPA2	Pre-post WPA Comparison	Complete Student Info Sheet: General	Complete Student Info sheet: WPA	Complete Interview
	Female: 19	15	19	15	18	15	17
	Male: 10	6	10	6	9	7	8
Totals	29	21	29	21	27	22	25

The decision was taken to incorporate the relevant data from the Student Information Sheet and the interview for those participants who had not completed the first-year WPA. It was agreed that while comparisons of the WPA scores were not possible, some important information could be gained from these students about the strategies they used to improve their writing skills over the course of their university careers.

Student Performance: Results from the WPA

Table 3 shows assessment scores and sub-scores for the WPA completed in the first year of study (WPA 1) and again in the final year of study (WPA 2). Twenty-one students had written both the first-year and the fourth-year WPA. Statistical analysis of the WPA1 and WPA 2 scores reveals a significant increase in Overall Scores between WPA 1 and WPA 2 ($p=.003$).

Table 3. T-test: Writing Proficiency Assessment, Pre-test (1) with Post-test (2)

N=21		Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error Of Mean	t (DF=20)	Sig.
Grammar	Grammar 2 1	22.9 20.8	11.59 10.88	2.53 2.37	.677	.51
Summary	Argument 2 1	3.52 2.57	.73 1.13	.16 .25	3.659	.002
	Organization 2 1	3.38 2.52	.57 1.18	.12 .26	3.408	.003
	Detail 2 1	3.40 2.33	.64 .91	.14 .19	4.833	.000
	Clarity 2 1	3.55 2.52	.82 1.10	.18 .24	4.096	.001
	Total 2 1	13.86 9.93	2.54 3.92	.55 .85	4.458	.000
	Average 2 1	3.47 2.49	.64 .97	.14 .21	4.498	.000
Essay	Introduction 2 1	3.81 3.26	.75 1.37	.16 .30	1.656	.11
	Thesis 2 1	3.69 3.17	.64 1.06	.14 .23	1.905	.07
	Support 2 1	3.17 2.69	.45 1.19	.09 .26	2.069	.052
	Conclusion 2 1	2.95 2.83	.80 1.06	.17 .23	.384	.71
	Coherence 2 1	3.81 3.02	.62 1.24	.13 .27	2.791	.01
	Essay Total 2 1	17.43 15.00	2.43 4.83	.53 1.05	2.174	.04
	Essay Average 2 1	3.50 3.01	.49 1.04	.10 .23	2.025	.056
Overall	Overall Score 2 1	3.93 2.79	.87 1.42	.19 .31	3.310	.003

There was also a significant difference in all of the sub-scores for the assessment of Summary-writing skills. In the scores for the Essay-writing component, there was a significant difference for only the Essay-writing sub-skills of Coherence, and the Essay total score. It is no surprise

that over the course of four years at university, students would improve their skills in summary writing. The lack of improvement in more of the components of essay writing points to the possible variability in scores of the sub skills; it is quite common for a student to receive a high overall score in spite of achieving a lower score in one of the sub-skill areas. What is important to note is that there is a marked improvement in Overall Scores, which takes into account overall performance in the Summary, Essay, and Error Checklist scores.

Table 4. Correlation of Essays Average Score with Overall Score WPA 2

Overall Score WPA 2	Grade Average Score by Range				Total Students N = 25
	60.0 – 69.9	70.0 – 79.9	80.0 – 89.9	90.0 – 99.9	
3.0	0	4	3	1	8 (32%)
4.0	2	1	8	0	11 (44%)
5.0	0	0	3	1	4 (16%)
5.5	0	0	0	1	1 (4%)
6.0	0	0	1	0	1 (4%)
Total	2	5	15	3	25 (100%)
Correlation Statistic					
			Grades Average		Overall Score
Grades Average:	Pearson Correlation		1		.462*
	Sig. (2-tailed)				.020
	N		25		25
Overall Score:	Pearson Correlation		.462*		1
	Sig. (2-tailed)				.020
	N		25		25

Table 4 shows the correlation between the participants' reported average scores for five essays in content area courses and their overall score from the WPA completed in their final year of study (WPA 2). The average essay scores were computed for the top five grades received in essays that were reported by the participants on the Student Information Sheet. There is a strong correlation between the average scores in essay courses and the overall scores achieved on the fourth- year WPA ($p=.02$). Not surprisingly, the top grade average of 91.2 per cent belonged to a student who also scored 5.5 out of 6 on the fourth-year WPA. There are however, some discrepancies in these comparisons: two students with course average scores of only 68.2 per cent and 69.2 per cent scored well into the mid-range on the WPA with a score of 4. Four students whose essay average scores ranged from 70 per cent to 74.6 per cent received WPA scores of only 3. While this is not an unusual or alarming finding, the low numbers in our sample may cause these anomalies to appear to be more prevalent than the correlation statistic indicates. The significant overall correlation assures us that there is a valid

connection between the grades the students are achieving in their essay courses and their Overall Scores in the fourth-year WPA.

Summary of Key Findings

- The sample of graduating students is small, and is not representative of the population in terms of gender or major subject concentration; therefore, any significance must be viewed with caution.
- Statistical analysis of the WPA 1 and WPA 2 scores reveals a significant increase in Overall Scores between WPA 1 and WPA 2 ($p=.003$). There was also a significant difference in all of the sub-scores for the assessment of Summary-writing skills. In the scores for the Essay-writing component, there was a significant difference for only the Essay-writing sub-skills of Coherence, and the Essay total score.
- There is a strong correlation between the average scores in essay courses and the overall scores achieved on the fourth-year WPA ($p=.02$). This significant overall correlation indicates that the WPA test is evidentially valid, and that we can make inferences about students' writing ability from this instrument.

IV. The Writing Proficiency Assessment: Qualitative Analysis

Student Outcomes: Summary of Responses from the Student Information Sheet

Questions on the hand-written Student Information Sheet were designed to obtain information about students' performance and self-concept as writers, the effect of the first-year Writing Proficiency Assessment on their awareness of gaps in their writing skills, and what strategies they used to improve their writing skills immediately following the WPA, and over the course of their university careers. Questions asked during the follow-up interview probed for more detail about information given on the Student Information Sheet, and also encouraged students to reflect on how their experiences with writing improvement may have affected their view of themselves as writers, and their view of writing in general.

The first five questions on the Student Information Sheet asked students about the number of essay-based courses they had completed and the number of essays that were written throughout their undergraduate training, a self-assessment of their writing ability, and an estimate of the frequency of their use of the Writing Skills Centre. Responses to these questions are summarized in Table 5.

Academic Activity

Most students (55.6 per cent) had taken 10 to 15 essay courses, had written more than 15 essays over the course of their careers (80.8 per cent), and considered themselves to be good writers (74.1 per cent) as they prepared to graduate. While we could not, as Pemberton (2003) suggests, assess the growth of students' self-efficacy beliefs over time, we did correlate the strength of their beliefs with actual achievement in the top five essay scores. Although there was no significance, we found that the majority of those who felt that they were good writers (16 students or 59.2 per cent), also achieved essay scores in the 70 per cent to 89 per cent range. Recalling the significance of difference between first-year WPA scores and fourth-year scores, we realize that many of these students have developed this skill, and correspondingly this belief, over the course of their university careers. This was the basis upon which we sought more detailed information about what caused the students to realize they needed to improve their academic writing skills at university, and what were the key factors in that improvement.

Table 5. Summary of Responses from Student Information Sheet: General Information

Question	Response	Response frequency (N = 27)	
		#	%
Essay Courses Taken	More than 15 courses	7	25.9
	10 to 15	15	55.6
	Fewer than 10	5	18.5
Essays written	More than 15 essays	21	77.8
	11 to 15	4	14.8
	6 to 10	1	3.7
	No response	1	3.7
Writing Ability	Good writer	20	74.1
	Somewhat	6	22.2
	No	1	3.7
Use of Writing Skills Centre	Yes	17	63.0
	No	10	37.0
Visits to Writing Centre	15 or more	3	13.6
	1 to 5 visits	14	63.7
	Never visited	5	22.7

The majority of participants had used the Writing Skills Centre over four years of study, but 63.7 per cent reported visiting on fewer than five occasions during that time. Some of the students' comments in response to the interview question concerning reasons why they may not have sought help provide some insight about the low rate of use of the Writing Skills Centre:

Example 1: I was under the impression that you had to have your paper done before you came to the writing services. And then I found out okay, no you don't have to, even if you just have your thesis or you just have, like kind of what you want to write or you have a couple of paragraphs done. Yeah, you can still come in and get feedback from it.

Example 2: See, I haven't actually independently gone to the writing centre to actually have anything evaluated yet. But I have been told by a lot of people in my...in my specific paper writing courses that the writing centre was sort of invaluable for them.

It would be interesting to survey a sample of students in each year of their university career to assess their knowledge level and attitudes concerning external writing supports that are available. As these quotes show, some of the information seems to have come to the students by chance.

Role of the Writing Proficiency Assessment in Writing Improvement

The next five questions on the Student Information Sheet were concerned with students' responses to the WPA, and the final two questions asked students about preferred strategies to improve their writing. From the information presented in Table 6, it appears that generally the

WPA was well-received by the students: 16 of the 22 students who were eligible to complete this section reported that they had read the feedback, and most of the students (77.3 per cent) felt that the WPA was at least a somewhat useful exercise. The strength of this response indicates that the WPA may be a valid assessment of writing ability insofar as it appears to be relevant to the needs of the students in our study. Because of the low numbers of students who were actually eligible to make this judgement, however, we view this positive indication with caution.

Just over one-third of the 22 students responding reported that the WPA feedback had helped to point out weaknesses in their writing, and four students indicated that the feedback had showed them their strengths as writers. There were five of the students (22.7 per cent) who felt that the WPA feedback was not useful for them at all. This response was distributed evenly among the students in terms of their range of Overall Scores received on the first-year WPA.

Table 6. Responses from Student Information Sheet: Writing Proficiency Assessment

Question	Response Detail	Frequency (N = 22)	
		#	%
Read feedback	Yes	16	72.7
	No	4	18.2
	Did not receive feedback	2	9.1
Took action	Spoke to a friend or family	7	31.8
	None	7	31.8
	Visited Writing Skills Centre	5	22.9
	Spoke to professor	1	4.5
	Got serious about writing	1	4.5
	Edited papers	1	4.5
WPA a useful exercise	Somewhat	10	45.5
	Very	1	4.5
	Useful	6	27.3
	Not very useful	3	13.6
	Useless	2	9.1
WPA usefulness; detail	Pointed out weaknesses	8	36.4
	Showed my strengths	4	18.2
	Took writing more seriously	4	18.2
	Not useful	4	18.2
	Showed that I needed help	1	4.5
	Not sure	1	4.5
Primary influence on essay writing	Professors	13	59.3
	Other: reading, planning	3	13.6
	Writing Course	3	13.6
	Peers	1	4.5
	Writing Skills Centre	2	9.0
Different strategy to employ in future	Take more time	8	38.1
	Go to Writing Skills Centre	6	28.6
	Get help from professors	5	19.0
	Take a writing course	1	4.5
	Nothing	2	9.0
	No response	1	4.5

There does not appear, then, to be a relationship between test scores and students' perceptions of the efficacy of the WPA. Again, the low numbers of students present a challenge in making any inferences from the data concerning the validity of the WPA from the Student Information Sheet. We looked for further insight on this issue in the follow-up oral interviews.

Writing Improvement Strategies

When asked what actions they had taken as a result of receiving the feedback from the WPA, 33 per cent of the students had spoken to a friend or family member, and five students (22.9 per cent) had visited the Writing Skills Centre. Two of these students, whose average scores on their top five essays were in the 80 per cent to 89 per cent range, noted that they used the Writing Skills Centre, but they had not visited until sometime after receiving the feedback. Only one student reported speaking to a professor. Thirty-three per cent of the students who responded to the survey had taken no action at all. This range of reported action – or inaction – reflects a questionable aspect of the feedback phase of the WPA process at Huron University College: students are provided with access to the feedback, but they are free to ignore the information, or to take some action on their own. It is not known to what degree students would participate in a follow-up strategy such as visiting the Writing Skills Centre if this were more actively encouraged when students received their scores and feedback from the first-year WPA.

Fifteen of the students (55.6 per cent) cited consultation with professors as a key strategy for improving writing over the course of their university careers. It is interesting to note that while interaction with faculty is the method of choice generally, only one student sought this assistance specifically as a direct result of receiving feedback on the WPA. This discrepancy may be due to the evolving nature of the socio-cultural aspect of writing development, i.e., that students who are new to the university may rely more heavily on the peer group with whom they can more readily identify. We see evidence of this in the high numbers of students who spoke to a friend or family member after the first-year WPA, while only one student reported peer influence as a primary factor in writing improvement. As students develop a degree of confidence, it may be that the desire – and necessity – to consult professors becomes more prevalent as a valued strategy for writing improvement.

The final question on the Student Information Sheet concerned the strategies that students would employ to hone their writing skills at university. The most prevalent response concerned the use of time, and using more of it to advantage. Visiting the Writing Skills Centre and seeking help from a professor more often were the second and third most popular responses, respectively. Only one student indicated that he or she would take a writing course. Again, these responses – though inconclusive – point to the possibility of the students' evolving awareness of the value of social interaction activities in improving writing. Although these reflections by students are speculative, one wonders if the Writing Proficiency Assessment might be the point at which students begin to see writing as a socially-constructed activity; simply receiving feedback about one's scores provides an indication of an individual's performance relative to an overall standard which has been set by a competent group of academic writers. Assuming that new students aspire to become members in this group, we questioned our participants during the follow-up interview, hoping for an articulation of that "aha"

moment when, as freshmen, they realized they must adapt in order to gain entrance to the academic circle. This possibility is explored further in the Interview Analyses.

Summary of Key Findings

- Most of the students who responded (77.3 per cent) felt that the WPA was at least a somewhat useful exercise. The strength of this response indicates that the WPA may be a valid assessment of writing ability insofar as it appears to be relevant to the needs of the students in our study.
- Fifteen of the students (55.6 per cent) cited consultation with professors as a key strategy for improving writing over the course of their university careers.
- The top three strategies that students would employ in future to hone their writing skills at university are: (1) managing time more productively, (2) visiting the Writing Skills Centre, and (3) seeking help from professors more frequently.

Summary of Responses from Student Interviews

Twenty-five students were able to participate in a follow-up interview after completing the Student Information Sheet and the fourth-year WPA. These questions were designed to augment the students' brief written responses from the Student Information Sheet, and to provide an opportunity for them to comment further on several aspects of their writing skills: (a) their evolving view of themselves as writers and the factors that may have changed that view once they entered university; (b) the role of the WPA and external supports in improving their writing skills; and (c) their reflections on the long-term impact of their writing improvement experiences while studying at Huron.

Developing Awareness of Writing Skills

A breakdown of the number of comments made in response to interview questions about developing awareness of writing skills, and the strategies that students found to be helpful, appear in Appendix C. As expected, interview comments generally reflected the responses from the Student Information Sheet.

a) Self-assessment

Most students had indicated in their self-assessment that they were good writers at present; in the interviews, they were able to articulate an awareness of the specific areas in which they were skilled:

"...I'm not a creative writer, I'm not any kind of other writer, I'm an essay writer."

"I think I'm an average writer. I know that I still have some weaknesses in writing I need to work on, but I think I've come a long way since, like, high school, since first year even."

b) *Change in self-assessment to cope with new academic expectations*

Those interviewed generally admitted that there had been a negative change in their self-assessment as writers when they began writing at the university level. Some were quite specific about the differences between expectations at the secondary school level and those at the university level:

"Well, it became very clear that you do have to, you have to have a thesis. You can't just describe things like you can get away with [in] a high school paper....I find it challenging, working with 10 high quality sources as opposed to maybe a reflection piece of just, you know, the practising thing we were doing in high school."

"It was really shocking to see...even my marks generally to take such a hit when I came to university, then going from honours down to 60's. ... And that's a huge blow to take. I mean they always say that you do worse in university, but I guess I never expected that 15 per cent drop."

c) *The Role of the WPA in increasing awareness of gaps in skill level*

Students generally accepted that the WPA helped them to become more aware of the level of skill required at university. The feedback they received represented an "aha" moment when the students realized that more would be required of them:

"When I first heard about [the WPA] I thought it was a really good idea. Again, I thought that my writing was going to be fine. But it really opened my eyes and I was like 'Okay, this is what professors are expecting, and this is kind of a guideline to go by'. It really kind of gave some more structure to my writing."

"But when I got feedback, I noticed that it was all faults I've noticed in my own writing."

"I think that's one really good thing about the test that it opens your eyes to where you need help and then how you can get help for it."

For these students, the WPA was valuable in that it "opened their eyes" early in the first year of university and enhanced their awareness of the expectations at this level. In this respect, it appears that the WPA plays a significant role in orienting new students to the "rules" of participation in the academic community.

Other students, however, acknowledged that the WPA was not taken seriously by them, and it represented a missed opportunity. Often for these students, the "aha" moment of realization came at the expense of their first university essay mark:

*"I don't think I could have been **less** serious about the proficiency assessment... I was just trying to wrestle with everything...that university has to offer and given that in September...being bombarded with so many different arenas of academic, social, extracurricular that I pursued that I completed the [WPA] assignments, but I didn't concern myself with, or give, probably, my best effort."*

"...in the first year I wrote a paper for my first-year English class, and this was a bad "aha [moment]. It was an opinion paper that was a reaction to a text... I felt really strongly about the article but I didn't get a very good mark because I think I felt too strongly about it to think in a logical way so my argumentation wasn't very strong..."

"I didn't feel very strong about my first-year essay writing. I would often get very bogged down in the research. I remember a particular one. It was a political science paper. And I was writing about environmentalism and I just had the worst experience writing this essay. And it really made me realize how much I still had to learn about research, about how to formulate a thesis and not get overwhelmed by the huge amount of books and literature there is on this subject. So that was an "aha" moment too in the sense of making me realize that I had enormous amount of growth still to do.

"The first paper I wrote I was completely satisfied... I was faced with 65 per cent. At that point I knew that there[would] be some serious changes that would have to be taken."

Developing Writing Skills

a) "Other" regulation

Students were asked to elaborate on their efforts to seek help with their writing at university, especially after receiving feedback from the WPA. Results from the written information indicated that approximately 33 per cent of the students had spoken to a friend or family member after receiving the WPA results, and several had visited the Writing Skills Centre. An equal number, however, had taken no action at all. From this information we know that there was no clear consensus on what strategies were needed at this point; certainly the students were not in a position to set goals for themselves. It appears that new students feel that they are somewhat outside of the academic circle, and do not feel that they belong or have much to contribute:

"I can't actually remember the topic of the first one [WPA], but I remember being surprised at how quickly you had to think of the answers, because it wasn't just, you know, it wasn't really basic. It was something you had, having an opinion and to organize your thoughts. I think it was something that I haven't thought about that much. So it did require quite a bit of quick thinking, just getting organized. That's my impression."

"...I had to learn how to adapt, for example, for writing history papers; very different styles, very different expectations as to what's going to go into it. ... and all teachers want different elements. Some have more emphasis on the creative and independent things. Some are more kind of condensing what the other people thought. So, basically, the biggest change in my writing is like how I viewed it ... like different styles ... and expectations I had to meet with my writing."

Not surprisingly, comments from the interviews indicate that professors tend to become the main source of external or "other" regulation for writing improvement. Consulting with faculty represents an opportunity for "collaboration with more knowledgeable others", as Lantolf and Thorne (2007) have indicated. Here we see the beginnings of an awareness of the value of the interaction with a trusted member of the academic circle as a key strategy in writing improvement:

"[It was in a first-year] course where my professor said, 'You have a brilliant writing style'. ... there are certain words you tend to use ... so I tended to use them time and again. Then I keep going back to different professors you know, so I don't wear [them] out."

"From my professors again, just when I do get a bad mark from them, going to see them more often, to even find out what they're looking for on the essay before I start writing it, not after I get it back."

"I went into [the] professor's office and I had my binder and my notes. ... I just wanted to know, like how can I become more organized, how can [I] be a better learner, and we looked over a paper that I had just written."

"And I've just found it helps enormously to talk to professors, and it helps you to sort out your ideas and helps you to know what you are working for. ... I've learned that they are really not intimidating, and they want you to come to use the office hours, not just be afraid."

Consulting professors seems to provide two advantages for students: first, students gain immediate insight into the elements that will improve the outcome in a particular essay and second, they are aware that they are absorbing key information about subtle differences in writing among the various disciplines and genres within those disciplines.

b) *"Self"-regulation*

At some point in a student's university career, he or she must begin to rely on individual judgment in order to plan and organize the more sophisticated essays that are required in the upper years of university. This is where Donato (2000) challenges the traditional view of learners as "isolated individuals who grapple for higher mental ground separated from the cultural institutions and historical conditions in which they learn"(p. 46). This and Zawacki (2006) would agree. They indicate that students rely quite heavily on information they receive from their environment:

In their need for parameters, students reveal their understanding that writing is transactional writing and as with any transactional situation the writer needs to know what the reader wants, perhaps even more so when a grade is at stake (p. 125).

These authors found in their research that students rely on first essay feedback, model essays, information about expectations and grading and information from the professors on genres and conventions within the discipline. In our study we found that by the upper years, students have acquired knowledge in a particular subject; they are likely beginning to combine what they have learned in related courses with accepted academic language, and now are contributing ideas in a more complex framework.

"I think it's going to affect it greatly because I know for one I'm not as afraid to write, you know what I mean? (Yeah.) I used to... I find I'm better putting my view in words, and I found through all the essays that I've written, and through the help that I've got that I still can make a valid point through my writing, it just... it might take me a little bit longer than someone else writing a paper."

"First year I did [course name] and we had to write about ...a topic that I didn't even understand. I didn't do it last minute, but ...then I rushed it, and that's when I realized 'Aha, I need to put more effort into it'. I mean not necessarily effort, but research it more. And not just kind of, you know, like do it last minute."

We asked students to reflect on this evolution by probing for writing strategies that they would use if given the opportunity, and what would motivate them to do so. The verbal responses, as well as survey data, indicated that students would primarily manage their time better and seek more help from their professors:

"So spend more time.... I'm used to working [to] deadlines ...I am used to writing essays for a certain due date.... the papers that I spent the most amount of time on are the ones[where] I do the best. So, I would say spend more time."

"By far the biggest problem I've faced with a heavy load of essay courses is time management."

There were also several comments made about the value of accessing the Writing Skills Centre:

"With the writing services...that one can go with taking more time with writing instead of leaving it later, putting it off and then rushing at the end to hand it in ... getting it done soon enough that I could come to the writing centre and get the help that would have helped improve my mark."

"... people have different styles, and, you know, that's where the Writing Centre would come in for someone like me, even though I didn't use it as much as I would have liked to... is maybe I have the ideas, or the application, or you know, something I want to create or put together (Yeah.) but if you can't put it... if you don't have that 35 sources done correctly, and you don't have, you know, the 15, or 20 page essay on that, so... it kind of complements your strengths and weaknesses I guess on whatever you need. The Writing Centre, I think in theory, has the ability to do both."

"So I came to the Writing Centre, just to help me find mistakes that I've made, so that I could find them by myself to improve that way. There was no real "Oh, I got a bad mark" and I needed to come to the Writing Centre... it was more just, well, I am trying something new. I want to do the best I can."

It is clear that students see the value in having a variety of resources available from which to choose in order to accomplish their goals in writing. It is also clear that students value the interaction with a number of members of the learning community, from peers and professors to staff in the Writing Skills Centre. At this point, there were fewer comments by students about feeling overwhelmed and somewhat alien to the parameters of academic discourse, and more about their increasing confidence in taking their rightful place within this culture:

"...from Huron, writing essays, writing in different disciplines definitely taught me a lot. For example, like History, even in how to conduct research, that's, like how to take notes and how to

synthesize things, that's definitely, probably the strength that in the History program I've learnt here, and then from English, to think creatively and to write creatively as well".

"One very impressive thing I have [seen] when I was in the writing centre, usually I came with a very professional essay because I'm in my final year and sometimes I just hand in the [paper] for them to look at. So it's really a challenge for me because the person in the writing centre, they should know what I am talking about, so it's like I'm explaining [a subject] to a person whose major is probably English or Literature, so I think that really requires me to express myself very clearly to a non-professional person."

It is apparent from some comments, however, that misinformation and misapprehensions still exist concerning the role of support services such as the Writing Skills Centre. One participant seemed to think that there was a disconnect between the Writing Skills Centre and the academic style of writing that is required in all courses:

"... when I finish my draft I would go to someone professional for help. If it's an academic idea, I would go to my professor; if it's merely writing I would go to the Writing Centre..."

The comment from this participant seems to imply that disciplinary content (what is said) is somehow distinct from the form and format of writing (how it is said). Postsecondary institutions could perhaps do a better job of informing students about the interplay between subject-specific requirements and the more general standards of good and clear academic writing.

Full participation in communities of practice

Self-regulation helped students to seek out peers and experts for advice on their writing. They also began to realize that good writing, more often than not, involved collaboration or negotiation of meaning with the source of advice:

"So... yeah, that. And then the writing services just because I found that it does help to talk about your idea with someone (Yeah.) because then you have to process it (mm...hmm...) in a different way from just, like, thinking about it in your head. (Yeah.) So it... it clarifies the main point of what you're trying to get across, whereas, like, in your mind it's all a jumble so it's mostly for... for the thought process."

"I think, like, because you know that you have a reader who is, like, intelligent and knows what you are writing about (Yeah.) you learn to use... like... hmm... you learn to situate your writing and, like, practice writing for an audience."

In fact, some students were able to recognize the value of collaboration in all academic writing. It is easy to see how students' perceptions have shifted from feeling that good writing is a skill which is external to a new student, towards seeing themselves as full participants in a more culturally appropriate exchange of ideas:

"But then I grew, I think being exposed to the culture of writing and how professors are constantly bouncing off their ideas with others, and everyone is editing and it does not reflect poorly on oneself to

have one's work edited because that is essentially where only good writing can come from. [It is] because you have to connect with an audience and you are ...the way to connect with an audience is to basically work with the audience to [reach] a superior product. So it was a definite paradigm shift and since then I've never ever been sceptical and reluctant to seek help for my writing."

"My experience at (this university) has showed me that there is, um, no end point to a writer, and that every single professor and the people who were instructing us are on similar journey, there is no categories of writing that really fit when you can just basically say "That's it!", "I got it!", "I know how to..", like similar to, and well when you shoot a basketball through a hoop, you can't just say "Well, I figured this thing out."

Instead of viewing writing as a final product, some students seem to be aware that writing at its best involves a process of co-authorship. In their eyes, the Writing Skills Centre is not a place where students come in with a product, but a place where students are welcomed to participate and engage in the process of collaborative writing. This collaborative engagement seemed to be apparent throughout the school:

"I guess, yes. Actually, in my thesis class, we had a presentation by Dr. H. about writing everything. After that presentation, we talked about "finding your voice", right? And I think I've appreciated professors who are active in helping you write a different way than for instance you know, who encourage students to find their own voice in writing and who don't expect...who don't have ...expectations for students' writing. I found that more prevalent at Huron than at main campus."

Finally, the students were asked to reflect on the kinds of writing they envision themselves engaging in after university, and to comment on how they feel their experiences with writing at Huron had affected that view. It is not surprising that all students acknowledged that they would be doing some kind of writing, from writing "in teaching", or a "more creative type of writing", to "composing reports". One student declared that "my goal since I was eight is to write a book". What was surprising was the extent to which students were aware of the impact that good writing experiences had had on their motivation to put these plans into effect:

"And then or I guess, I said I don't want to lose what I have learned, so the writing and the things that I've learned at [this university] would hopefully motivate me to continue writing."

"And well, another thing I would I add about Huron is because it's liberal arts, because it is, they want well-rounded. You can pull in different ideas that you have in other classes, history, through English class and ...that's really encouraged by professors at Huron".

Summary of Key Impressions from the Interviews

- There is often a negative change in students' assessment of themselves as writers when they begin to write at the university level.
- The WPA plays a significant role in orienting new students to the "rules" of participation in the academic community.
- New students feel that they are somewhat outside of the academic circle and do not feel that they belong or have much to contribute.
- Consulting with faculty represents an opportunity for "collaboration with more knowledgeable others".
- As they progress with their studies, students generally become better able to set procedural goals that will help them participate more actively as writers within the academic community.
- Students would primarily manage their time better and seek more help from their professors in order to improve their skills.
- Students see the value in being able to decide what to do, and to have the resources in place to accomplish the tasks. Students value the interaction with members of the academic community, from peers and professors to staff in the Writing Skills Centre.
- Postsecondary institutions could perhaps do a better job of informing students about the interplay between subject-specific requirements and the more general standards of good and clear academic writing.
- Some students seem to be aware that writing at its best is a collaborative process.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Directions

This study has cast light on two important issues: (1) the legitimacy of the WPA as an introduction to the culture of writing in the university academic discourse community; and (2) the processes and resources that students use to become confident and competent members of that community.

When coming into university in first year, students look to several different sources of information for confirmation of their academic skills. According to the Student Information Sheets from our study, professors (not surprisingly) play the largest part in helping students develop an awareness of writing skills, as indicated by 52 per cent of the responses to the “primary influence on essay writing” question. A number of “other” factors that help students develop writing skills, such as reading, planning and peer help, appear to constitute 24 per cent of the help that students receive. Within that context, the Writing Proficiency Assessment has a two-pronged function: it acknowledges the skills that students bring to the College from secondary school, and it gives students direction about which skills they need to improve for future success. An impressive 62 per cent of the students asserted that it was a useful exercise, and a similar percentage of responses indicated that its usefulness was related to helping them develop an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses.

Receiving information about academic skills does not, however, necessarily cause students to act on that information. While 55 per cent of the respondents read the feedback from the WPA, almost 46 per cent took no direct action as a result of the feedback. The category “Different strategies to employ in future” shows that while students may not yet have taken actions to support their writing skills, many of them intend to do so in the future. Thirty-five per cent of the respondents would “take more time”; 21 per cent intend to come to the writing centre and 7 per cent intend to take a writing course. However, since the respondents are all in their final year before graduation, these responses must be viewed with caution because they are speculative. The interview responses of the students as shown in Appendix C, Table 1, seem to confirm these findings. While 15 per cent of the comments coded for the development of an awareness of writing skills mentioned the WPA as a factor in this development, 67 per cent attributed that development to “other” factors. Students who did take action to improve their skills tended to go to the Writing Skills Centre, but the use of the Centre was inhibited by students’ perceptions that generic writing skills’ improvement would not help them significantly with discipline-specific requirements in writing.

The WPA does seem to measure real writing skills that develop over the students’ undergraduate careers. The comparison of WPA 1 and WPA 2 shows a significant difference in performance in writing between the entry-level students and those about to graduate. These differences are statistically significant in only some select areas, however: the overall score, the summary writing (all four criteria), the total essay score, coherence and the development of an argument. Students do not seem to develop skills in creating an introduction or a conclusion, or

in the inclusion of scholarly support. Perhaps the most surprising area where no significant difference in performance was found was in the area of grammar and sentence structure. Furthermore, the comparison of the WPA 2 performance with essay average scores is significant ($p=.02$) on a two-tailed test. This does not in itself shed light on the specific influence that the WPA has on students' skills development, but does indicate that the WPA and content-area essays measure the same things.

An important finding of the study is that there is a statistically significant relationship between the scores that students receive on the WPA and the grades that they receive in their essays, and this relationship is strongest at the upper ranges of grades. Eighty per cent of the students who reported an average grade of A on their content-course essays received an Overall Score of 4, 5 or 6 on the Writing Proficiency Assessment. These scores indicate “minor flaws in essay and summary writing and no more than 20 errors in grammar and sentence structure”. This means that even though the Writing Proficiency Assessment is a generic measure of students' writing ability, and does not measure content-specific knowledge, it nevertheless correlates strongly to students' performance in their content-specific work. This strengthens the argument that the Writing Proficiency Assessment has valuable information to give to the students on their academic strengths and weaknesses.

Limitations of the Study

The lack of significant difference in performance on grammar and sentence structure and some areas of essay development between the WPA 1 and WPA 2 remains unexplained in this study. This could be attributed to the format of an assessment (i.e. timed, tied to one reading), lack of motivation, misunderstanding of performance criteria, marker bias, subject matter of the reading or sample size.

Generalizability of findings may be an issue because of the small sample size, and in a more general sense due to the liberal arts curriculum followed at the college. There are no science courses taught at the college, and the only math courses are basic and applied.

Beyond This Study

This study puts into perspective the value that the Writing Proficiency Assessment has in enhancing students' access to the academic writing culture of Huron University College. Whether this model can be adopted by other institutions depends on their culture of writing and the resources that they have at their disposal. At Huron, the students do not always seek help from formal services such as the WPA and the Writing Skills Centre, but this does not mean that these services are not of value to them. Some students ignore the feedback given with the WPA, but others look at the feedback and compare it with the feedback that they receive from their professors. Some students choose to use peers to read their essays, but others use the Writing Skills Centre as their outside reader. Some use the Writing Skills Centre for all aspects of their writing, but others use it selectively to help them correct what they perceive to be format and grammar issues.

There remains much to be done to continue to nurture that culture of writing at Huron. Given the correlation between performance on the WPA 2 and essay scores in content areas, we must look at how we can deliver the feedback on the WPA 1 in a way that will be meaningful to the first-year students and will provide them with the motivation to seek out those skills that they lack as well as how we can dispel myths about the function of the Writing Skills Centre that seem to persist in some segments of the student body? These questions may point the way for future initiatives at the college. For example, we could consider giving the feedback from the WPA 1 in multiple formats (online, through an Open House, in workshops or focus groups). We could conduct surveys of all the students several times a year (i.e., in late September, early January and late March) where we would assess their self-assessment of writing skills development, awareness of writing supports that are available, and their evaluation of the effectiveness of the Writing Skills Centre appointments that they have attended. We could hold real-time Question and Answer periods on-line with students, where we answer questions about the WPA and about the Writing Skills Centre.

Despite the need for continued self-reflection and renewal, we would venture to say that the academic writing culture is alive and well at Huron because of the congruence between the services offered and the academic discourse community engendered by the professors at the college. It is a model that works for us, and one which may work at other, similar institutions.

VI. References

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