NewSchool
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The Division of
STUDENT AFFAIRS
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Assessment Case Study
Division of Student Affairs – The Writing Initiative

Background:

The Writing Initiative began in Fall 2016 and was housed within the English Language Program, which later became part of The Center for Academic and Student Success (The Center) once it was established in 2017. The primary goal of the Initiative was to work with faculty to embed written assignments, along with critical thinking and reading, throughout the curriculum of NewSchool with the belief that doing so would allow students to learn how to write for their particular discipline, aid in learning the course content and meeting course learning outcomes, and provide the extensive practice and repetition needed to improve writing skills. This goal works in support of the institutional learning outcomes of critical thinking and effective written communication. The Initiative's secondary goal was to create an environment at our institution in which a culture of literacy is nurtured. The Initiative holds that such an environment would aid in the efforts to achieve its primary goal and would also help place the central academic process of writing in the spotlight. By the end of spring 2017, the Initiative had been integrated into eleven courses affecting all years of the undergraduate and graduate Architecture programs.

Building on the 2016-2017 work with the Initiative while incorporating needs identified by faculty, staff and students, the 2017-2018 collaboration focused on supporting undergraduate students in meeting the demands of thesis writing. This in turn also addressed the course learning outcome of written communication, which is part of all three fifth year studios (AR501, AR502, AR503).

Fifth year thesis instructors worked with the head of The Writing Initiative (The Director of The Center for Academic and Student Success) to plan strategies for integrating this writing support throughout the fifth year studios. During summer 2017, fall curriculum was designed. Winter and spring quarters were outlined with the understanding that those plans would be reassessed and solidified after each quarter based on outcomes achieved.

Fall 2017

In the fall, support was embedded through the implementation of "Wonderful Wednesday Writing Workshops" with all fifth year thesis studio (AR501) cohorts. In close conjunction with the faculty, these interactive weekly workshops were held for six weeks. Groups focused on students' writing for their theses, with particular emphasis on problem statements, thesis statements and critical positions. Also, during the first week of classes, the Initiative did a full group lecture on getting started on their theses, which included topics such as beginning their research, analyzing and synthesizing information, forming an argument and approaching writing. In addition to working on the students' writing skills, the workshops indirectly worked to teach students some strategies and skills of independent learning that could be applied to their writing endeavors in the future. Given that this goal of teaching independent learning skills was working towards a Division of Student Affairs' (DSA) divisional learning outcome, the DSA decided to assess The Writing Initiative in its quarterly assessment at the end of fall quarter.

To that end, at the end of the quarter, the students who participated in the writing workshops were given a survey to complete. These included the questions below:

1. Please share one or two things you have learned about writing, thesis statements, problem statements and/or critical positions. Please be as specific as possible.
2. What new strategies do you have, as a result of these workshops, for working independently on a writing assignment (thesis, research paper, etc.)? Again, please be specific.

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Methodology:

36 student artifacts were collected and assessed for each student's ability to identify a writing strategy that could be used in the future as they worked independently on writing. Surveys were assessed as having *Met* or *Not Met* this standard. Eight members of the Division of Student Affairs were paired and a collaborative norming exercise was completed by each pair. The 36 student artifacts were scored, each by two assessors. If there was a difference of opinion within the pair about a score, they were discussed so both parties reached a mutual agreement. Out of 36 artifacts, there were six that required additional discussion.

Student Affairs Divisional Learning Outcome:

DLO1: Students will demonstrate the ability to use the skills of an independent learner and self-advocate. (*This DLO maps to every department within the division*.)

Goal: 65% of students will receive a score of *Met*.

Scores:

Group 1		
Artifact#	Met	Not Met
1	X	
2	X	
3		X
4	X	
5	X	
6	X	
7	X	
8	X	
9	X	

Group 3		
Artifact#	Met	Not Met
20	X	
21	X	
22	X	
23		X
24	X	
25		X
26	X	
27	X	
28		X

Group 2		
Artifact#	Met	Not Met
10	X	
11	X	
12		X
13		X
14	X	
15	X	
16	X	
17		X
18	X	
19	X	

Group 4		
Artifact#	Met	Not Met
29	X	
30		X
31	X	
32	X	
33	X	
34		X
35		X
36		X

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Total Met = 25
Total Not Met = 11
69% Met

Goal Exceeded:
69% of the students surveyed were able to show the skills of an independent learner by clearly identify a writing strategy that could be used independently in the future.

Discussion / Conclusions:
- The Writing Workshops did not explicitly address writing strategies for independent learning as it was primarily focused on supporting faculty in achieving the CLOs for AR501. If it is, indeed, a goal of The Writing Initiative to promote independent learning, perhaps this should be addressed more overtly.
- 63% of the participating students filled out the survey. We would like to strive for a higher return rate. Additionally, because the survey was given casually in free studio time, it is possible that some students didn't put serious concerted effort into the responses. In the future, it might be better to administer the survey on the last day of the workshops, during workshop time, as students are gathered around the conference table. This would allow us to not only collect surveys from every student who is present that day, but would also give dedicated time and attention to the task of survey completion and allow for questions.
- Was the *Met/Not Met* scoring system the most appropriate? When chosen, the group thought that the responses would not lend themselves to a more detailed rating system. However, after completing the assessment, the group agreed that such responses could be rated on a more detailed system that includes options for introduced, developed and highly-developed levels.

Recommendations:
- Moving forward, The Writing Initiative should be clearer in the distinction between The Writing Initiative's independent goals (DLOs, PLOs, CLOs as a part of DSA and The Center) and the goals it shares with the course and faculty in terms of the CLOs. While we believe the learning outcomes for the Division were still embedded in The Initiative's workshops, clarifying this will help with incorporating the learning outcomes more explicitly when building the curriculum of writing workshops as well as the assessment tools.
- In the future, more detailed assessment rubrics should be fully considered and used when possible. When artifacts come from a group in which all participants are expected to be at the same level of development (such as AR501 in which all students are in their last year before graduation and would be expected to be at the highly developed level), using a more extensive rubric for the assessment of artifacts might afford the institution more robust information allowing for more meaningful insights from the data. For multi-level groups, learning outcomes associated with Student Affairs may not be able to be measured in this way as the expectations for level of development could vary greatly (ie. a first year student would be at the introduced-level whereas a fifth year student would be expected to be at the highly-developed level). For those situations, a binary (Met/Not Met) measure may be needed.

Follow-up:

- Along with other conversations, this assessment and subsequent discussion spurred the editing of The Center's learning outcomes. It was clear that much of The Center's work, especially that of The Writing Initiative, involved collaborating with faculty to help them achieve the CLOs for their courses and it became clear that this should be reflected in the LOs for The Center. This also helped to clarify how this same collaboration could be assessed for effectiveness in terms of CLOs on written communication for both the course and The Center. This took place in spring 2018 and is detailed later in this document.
- This assessment helped the DSA make strides in its understanding and use of rubrics and how those can be developed and utilized in measuring student affairs outcomes.
- The insight about explicit instruction in independent learning skills is being incorporated into The Writing Initiative's curriculum for the 2018-2019 academic year and will now be considered for other work done by the DSA.

Winter 2018

Winter quarter for fifth year undergraduate thesis students is a heavy design quarter. As such, the involvement of The Writing Initiative was lessened, but still present. Early in the quarter, a full-class lecture was held, led by studio faculty and the head of the Initiative. The lecture focused on the connection between the writing done in fall quarter and the design process that the students were about to undertake. Special attention was given to the critical position and how it informs design work. Throughout the quarter, small group workshops and drop-in tutoring took place in studio. Individual tutoring appointments continued to take place in The Center.

Spring 2018

Spring is the final quarter for thesis students. Designs are finalized and thesis books are assembled. Writing is completed and edited. Students were encouraged to revisit problem and thesis statements along with their critical positions to make edits reflecting learning that had taken place in winter quarter. Small group workshops and drop-in tutoring in studio continued throughout the term, as did appointments in The Center. Video testimonials were recorded with students who had utilized the resources of The Writing Initiative both in and outside of class.

After conversations with and input from a variety of leaders in the institution, including the studio faculty, the Librarian, the Director or Integrative Studies, the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, the Special Assistant to the President for Enrollment and Assessment, and the Dean of Student Affairs, the head of The Writing Initiative decided that thesis problem statements would be a strong artifact for assessment. One of the primary reasons for this was that a great deal of focus was given to the problem statement throughout this collaboration, particularly in fall quarter. In order to see if The Writing Initiative had any impact on thesis students' ability to communicate effectively in writing, it seemed logical to compare the problem statements from this year to those from a past year. As staff from The Center worked informally with thesis students the year before, problem statements from 2016 were chosen for comparison.

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Methodology:

40 student artifacts were collected at random and assessed for each student's ability to write an effective thesis problem statement; 20 from 2018 and 20 from 2016. The 40 artifacts were divided into two groups of 20 artifacts, with each group containing 10 artifacts from 2018 and 10 from 2016. An assessment committee was assembled, which included the Director of Integrative Studies, the Librarian, the Library Technician, and a professional writing tutor. A rubric was created by the head of The Writing Initiative with input from library staff and the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, the Special Assistant to the President for Enrollment and Assessment, and the Dean of Student Affairs. The rubric reflected the curriculum presented through The Writing Initiative along with the expectations of the thesis problem statements and measured the problem statements with three separate criteria. The assessment committee met and normed using three authentic student examples from 2016 and 2018.

The 40 student artifacts were then scored on the three criteria, each by two assessors. If the pair had a difference of opinion of more than one point about a score, the statement was discussed so both parties reached a mutual agreement to edit scores so that they were within one point of each other. Out of 40 artifacts with a total of 120 individual criteria scores, there were 16 that required additional discussion.
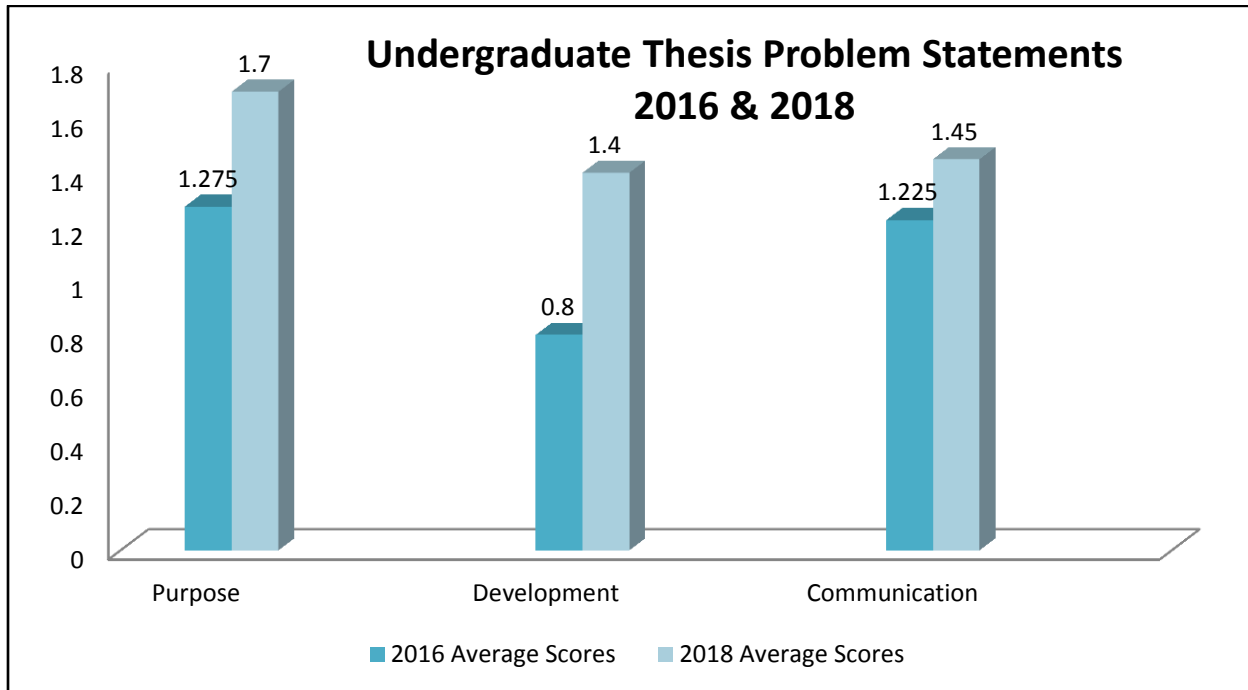
Rubric:

	Not Met (0)	Partially Met (1)	Met (2)	Met with Distinction (3)
Purpose: Statement fulfills the purpose of a problem statement	A problem is not presented.	Introduces a problem, though it is unclear or not connected to architecture.	A problem is presented and is connected to architecture.	A problem is presented and is explicitly connected to architecture.
Development: Statement uses content and context to paint a complete picture of the problem within the limited framework of a problem statement	Content to illustrate and contextualize the problem is nonexistent or irrelevant.	Uses some relevant content to illustrate and contextualize the problem though further development is needed.	Uses relevant content to illustrate and contextualize the problem.	Uses relevant and compelling content to illustrate and contextualize the problem. The complexities of the problem are explored.
Communication: Statement's language and organization communicates meaning	Uses language and/or organization that impede meaning resulting in an unclear statement.	Uses language and organization that convey meaning though parts may be vague, unclear and/or lacks flow.	Uses language and organization that flow smoothly and convey the problem in a simple and clear manner.	Uses graceful language and strong organization of ideas that skillfully communicate meaning to readers with clarity and fluency.

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Goal:
The goal was for the average scores on the 2018 problem statements to be higher than the average scores on the 2016 problem statements.

Scores:

**Undergraduate Thesis Problem Statements
2016 & 2018**

	Purpose	Development	Communication
2016 Average Scores	1.275	0.8	1.225
2018 Average Scores	1.7	1.4	1.45

■ 2016 Average Scores ■ 2018 Average Scores

Goal Met:
On all three criteria, average scores on the problem statements from 2018 exceeded the scores from 2016.

Purpose = Average score increased by .425
Development = Average score increased by .6
Communication = Average score increased by .225

Discussion / Conclusions:
- Anecdotally, the studio instructors reported seeing improvement in their students' written communication skills, clarity of thought, and ability to verbalize ideas and discuss their thesis projects. Students also showed a new understanding of the relationship of writing to their practice and other work. Many reported a better personal attitude towards writing. The data adds more tangible evidence that student work is improving as a result of The Writing Initiative's efforts. While, as a population, they are still performing below the larger goal of 2 on all criteria (which is expected of students at or near graduation), they are moving in the right direction.
- The Writing Initiative's work changed aspects of thesis studio. Beyond the workshops and tutoring sessions, the Initiative brought an increased awareness of the importance of writing. It is difficult to know all the factors that influenced student performance. Certainly the studio instructors are one of them. Working side-by-side with studio faculty may have given greater import to the curriculum being presented by the Initiative. That being said, there was of course

variance between studio instructors in their messaging as well as expectations of the thesis. While The Writing Initiative's lessons had the same goals for each group, it was tempered by individualized goals of each thesis cohort. For example, one instructor consistently suggested to students that the problem statements should be very brief, only a sentence or two, while other instructors did not. Does this influence the assessment of students as one large group? Should they be assessed separately? Should effort be put into norming formal expectations for thesis? What would be lost and gained if this were done?

- While a rubric was normed and used, the nature of writing assessment is still somewhat subjective (ie. one person's ideas of smooth transitions in a text requires connecting words while others feel that less explicit connections between concepts is sufficient). How much do these individual differences affect the assessment? Also, how much can audience be taken into consideration with this kind of writing? Clearly, the students are writing for an audience that has some knowledge of architecture. Should the layperson be able to follow the problem statements completely? Is it ineffective communication if they can't? Should architecture rather than writing professionals be assessing these or perhaps a combination of both?

- The proactive approach taken in this collaboration follows trends in higher education to embed co-curricular support, but it was also an approach informed by work here at the institution. The Center started an embedded tutoring/Supplemental Instruction program just over a year ago and saw an increase in student use of co-curricular resources. That evidence helped inform the choice to bring the support to the students rather than wait for them to access it themselves by coming to The Center for tutoring. The studio faculty recognized a need in a specialized area. This collaboration allowed architecture faculty to focus on their areas of strength while providing the support their students needed. This suggests a path forward for future co-curricular/curricular collaborations.

Recommendations:
- The Writing Initiative should create a presentation to share this collaboration, showing the curriculum, assessment procedure and results, faculty feedback on the collaboration and student testimonials. The presentation should be shared with faculty as well as administrative and academic leadership. The hope is that sharing this will spur future collaborations between The Writing Initiative, The Center, The Division of Student Affairs and the faculty. It would also provide an opportunity for faculty to share their insights into the collaboration as well as the interpretation of the results and to offer suggestions for how to use those results to inform practice and close the loop. It may also help promote the value of assessment and the institution's ongoing efforts in this arena.

- In addition, the results should be shared with thesis studio faculty for discussion. While there may be some changes to the thesis process in the coming academic year, this information can be used to determine how The Writing Initiative may be of service to the thesis students and faculty.