

Assessment Report — Writing Level 2 Capacity Working Group
May 31, 2021

Summary. During 2020-2021 the W2 Working Group assessed student learning of the upper-level writing skills involved in the Writing Level 2 capacity as currently defined in the Faculty Handbook. This year's focus was the second learning goal: writing thesis statements.

Allison Shutt, Chris Camfield, and Hope Coulter were the members of this working group. We met on March 29, 2021, 2:10-3:00 p.m., and May 27, 2021, 9:30-10:10 a.m., and worked intermittently by email outside the formal meeting times.

Evidence Collected—Direct Assessment. For direct assessment, we asked faculty to categorize students in their W2 courses according to levels of mastery of the four W2 learning goals. This year we targeted Learning Goal 2, which relates to students' ability to craft and manage a thesis statement. In addition, we collected responses on the other three learning goals in order to have a bigger set of data when we turn our focus to those in future years.

Slightly fewer than half of the Spring W2 faculty, or 14 individuals, responded to the survey, assessing 159 students in 16 courses. Results for all learning goals were clustered in the Strong and Satisfactory categories, with much lighter distribution across the lower categories of Needs Growth and Unsatisfactory. One outlier for Learning Goal 2—the thesis-related goal, our target focus—was the 25 N/A (Not Applicable) results reported by one faculty member in the Economics & Business Department. With that outlier removed, instructors assessed 44% of students as demonstrating Strong mastery of W2 skills and 37.3% as having Satisfactory mastery; thus, more than four-fifths of students were in the highest two tiers of competence at managing thesis statements. Again without the 25 N/A group, 16.5% were assessed as Needs Growth, while 2.2% were Unsatisfactory in their ability to manage thesis statements. It is worth noting that the 15 faculty members who did not mark the thesis statement goal as N/A represent a variety of departments across the three areas, including two other Economics & Business faculty members.

Obviously there is a diversity of opinion about the relevance of so-called thesis statements to writing in different disciplines. We believe that this N/A response, notably the only N/A result across the board, may stem from a lack of agreement about what "thesis statement" means in the context of different fields—i.e., the view that "we don't write thesis statements in my discipline." The W2 guidelines and learning outcomes in the Faculty Handbook no longer align with faculty understandings and practices. We address this in our recommendations at the end of this report.

Evidence Collected—Indirect Assessment. For indirect assessment, we provided a question to be added to the feedback surveys of W2 courses, asking students to evaluate whether the course helped them learn to formulate, develop, and bring to conclusion the thesis statements in their papers.

Eight instructors volunteered to add the provided question to their feedback survey for 9 W2 courses, or just over one-fourth of the W2 courses offered this spring. Due to technical problems

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Commented [SA2]: put in a new paragraph along with the sentence I flagged above?

the responses to this question were not available at the time this report was due. We will update the report once we have that feedback in hand.

One member of the Biology Department who declined to add the W2 question gave this explanation: “Unfortunately, I think the way this question is worded will serve to confuse my students. We don’t write thesis statements in biological research papers, and so I think students will answer ‘no’ and this will present erroneous results.”

This comment underscores what the direct assessment “N/A” response also suggested: that there is currently a lack of consensus among faculty about the applicability of the current W2 learning goals to every discipline. This might be largely semantic and could be addressed by revisions in the wording of Learning Goal 2 (for example, agreeing on alternate terms for “thesis statement,” such as “central claim,” “central argument,” or “clearly articulated main idea”). Maybe it signals skepticism about whether different specialized fields share common writing standards at all, or maybe certain courses simply aren’t coded appropriately for W2. At any rate, we believe that these differences of interpretation and opinion should be part of a faculty-wide conversation about W2 at some point in the future. For W2 to be meaningful and fair, faculty need to agree on its definition and goals.

Plans for Evidence-Based Change. In conclusion, although our W2 assessment is still a work in progress, we know it’s working because it has identified certain matters that need attention. Next year we plan to do the following:

- 1) Improve the quality and quantity of data we collect for W2 assessment, by
 - o conducting direct and indirect assessment in both semesters rather than only in spring (this year, due to remote learning and related stresses, we did not attempt W2 assessment in the fall);
 - o clarifying whether instructors are assessing all students enrolled in a given W2 course or only those students seeking W2;
 - o reminding W2 instructors at the beginning of each semester about the W2 learning goals and telling them which one will be the focus of assessment for that year;
 - o providing a link to information about W2 that instructors could insert in their syllabus to remind students what the designation means.
- 2) Recommend that Academic Affairs conduct a faculty-wide reevaluation of W2. Our survey last year showed that faculty do support this keeping this capacity as a means of establishing standards for good writing across the curriculum. However, when it comes to structuring and implementing W2, consensus breaks down. A faculty-wide conversation about this might result in a host of refinements, from altering certain logistics around the requirement to revising the guidelines and learning goals. Many considerations pertain, and opinions about W2 are likely to vary widely, even within departments. But investing time and energy in a comprehensive effort to find consensus is likely to pay off in several ways, including simpler administration, fairer and more consistent application, and more meaningful outcomes for our students.

Commented [SA3]: in August? I don't think we need to rush to deliver this data set (which will be small anyway)

Commented [SA4]: hide gender? does it matter if we include gender id-- I don't know

Commented [SA5]: yes!

Commented [SA6]: good point, well stated