

## **HUMANITIES GENERAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT REPORT 2014-5 ACADEMIC YEAR**

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### **Process:**

Given relatively low faculty participation in assessment of the HUMN 220/221 sequence in previous general education assessment cycles, the Humanities Core Committee chose to narrow the focus of assessment to learning outcome #3 (“Students will demonstrate the ability to think critically about moral, social and political arguments in the Western intellectual tradition, evaluating the logic of these arguments and relating them to historical and cultural context”). Faculty in all sections of HUMN 220 and 221 in both the fall and spring semesters were asked to assess student work on one of the two long analytical papers against a rubric developed about a decade ago. This rubric breaks the learning outcome into six discrete elements: argumentation, use of evidence, critical thinking, historical context, interdisciplinarity, and mechanics. Faculty were also asked to offer responses to several open ended questions about student work: what general trends do you see in the assessment data and general student performance in your HUMN class? What problems do your students have with writing skills? What are they doing well? What strategies and types of assignments do you use in HUMN classes to help students improve these skills? The Core Committee’s intent was to create a manageable assessment mechanism that would also generate meaningful data on student writing in the program, which might be of use to campus discussions of writing across the general education curriculum.

### **Results:**

Faculty from 18 sections of HUMN 220 and 221 submitted data on 687 students. A total of 61 sections, representing approximately 2260 students, were offered during the assessment period. Thus we have data on just under one-third of the students enrolled in HUMN sections during the 2014-5 academic year.

In general, faculty-reported results from assessment suggest high levels of student competence in all areas. In all categories, between 70% (Argumentation) and 85% (Interdisciplinarity) of student work either met or exceeded rubric standards. The percentage of students who did not meet rubric standards was less than 6% in all categories.

### **Reflections:**

In responses to the open ended questions, a number of faculty noted flaws in the assessment mechanism. The rubric’s delineation of six separate categories reflects the range of skills that are stressed across the entirety of the HUMN curriculum, but does not necessarily reflect the focus that faculty build into specific writing assignments. The most clear faculty statement of this problem suggested that “over the course of a whole semester I absolutely teach and require students to demonstrate all of those outcomes to some extent, but there is no way I would expect all those things to show up in a single five page paper”. Additionally, a number of faculty did not report data for specific categories on the

rubric, noting in their comments that the paper assignment was not designed to ask students to reflect on this particular issue. This is especially true for the “interdisciplinarity” component of the rubric, in which faculty submitted data on only 382 of the 614 papers assessed. Several faculty also noted that their paper assignments did not necessarily encourage reflection on historical context.

Additionally, under the “argumentation” component, the standards for students meeting and exceeding the learning outcome stress the formulation of an “original” argument. Several faculty noted that this is a problematic wording and may overlook some of the problems that students have in simply grasping the core ideas in the HUMN texts and in preparing a well constructed essay. As one faculty member put it: “my papers require a well-supported argument, but not in the way described on the rubric. My paper prompt doesn’t encourage – or even allow – students to generate an ‘original’ thesis – it requires them to do a much narrower kind of analysis.”

In reflecting on writing skills specifically, faculty noted that many students struggle at the start of the semester with basic mechanics and writing conventions. This includes statements such as: “they don’t always seem to understand the difference between stating an opinion and making an argument”, “students still seem to have very little understanding of how to do citations and references”, and students “do not routinely include a clear statement of their thesis in their introduction”. Faculty suggested that these problems might be more pronounced among students who did not practice writing skills regularly across the curriculum (for example, students whose only experiences with analytical essay assignments occurred in the INTD 105 experience) or who needed additional academic support at the College level (e.g. some non-native English speakers).

Faculty had fewer comments about student critical thinking skills, although several noted general disappointment in students’ grasp of course content and complexity. One response noted that “very few [students] have shown high levels of rigorous/careful student/reading/assessing of the books and central ideas covered”. Another noted that these problems run fairly deep, with students demonstrating problems in relatively simple tasks such as following syllabus directions and comprehending the main point of readings. On the other hand, several faculty praised student work in their classes, with one particularly satisfied instructor calling a section “one of the best in recent years”.

In terms of strategies for improving student work, faculty noted that careful grading and communication of expectations led to improvement in writing and critical thinking over the course of the semester. Several noted the importance of clearly communicating and reemphasizing requirements for the paper – the need for a clear thesis statement, use of persuasive and detailed supporting evidence, standardized citations, and proper writing mechanics. These faculty emphasized “very directed assignments” and “relentless admonishments to present a thesis statement with support...from the texts”. Several faculty also noted that they pay special attention to writing skills when commenting on student work, which encourages students to focus more carefully on argumentation and critical thinking. Others noted in class strategies to improve student skills, including guided response papers graded to focus on particular components of writing, in class

“writing tutorials” and workshops, and peer review. These faculty tended to emphasize writing as a process and stressed the extent to which assessment data generated at the end of the semester does not provide a good base of evidence for exploring the improvements that individual students made over the course of the semester.

**Suggestions:**

For future note, it would be worthwhile for the Humanities Core Committee and/or faculty to revisit and revise the rubric and/or learning outcome. Since there is a high premium placed on clear writing and argumentation in the HUMN sequence, revising the learning outcome and rubric to focus on the categories of argumentation, evidence, critical thinking, and mechanics (and moving interdisciplinary and historical context into a separate learning outcome to be assessed differently) would be a sensible course of action and would likely generate more meaningful data on student attainment of writing skills.

Going forward, it would perhaps be useful for the Humanities Core Committee and faculty to spend additional time talking about writing strategies in the HUMN program. The Core Committee’s original intent was to invite the coordinator of the campus Writing Learning Center to present data on what kind of assistance HUMN students are seeking. It would be worth it to follow up on this suggestion and to make connections with the INTD 105 program. This would help identify or develop tools for faculty that can help emphasize the good writing practices that students are being taught in the first year writing program and at the WLC. This would help improve the integration of core writing skills across the curriculum and could address some of the problems that faculty see with students’ writing mechanics in the HUMN classes.

**Data:**

|                            | Exceeded |       | Met |       | Approached |       | Not Met |      | Total |
|----------------------------|----------|-------|-----|-------|------------|-------|---------|------|-------|
| <b>Argumentation</b>       | 162      | 26.4% | 265 | 43.2% | 154        | 25.1% | 32      | 5.2% | 613   |
| <b>Evidence</b>            | 171      | 26.3% | 301 | 46.2% | 156        | 24.0% | 23      | 3.5% | 651   |
| <b>Critical Thinking</b>   | 163      | 23.7% | 344 | 50.1% | 145        | 21.1% | 35      | 5.1% | 687   |
| <b>Historical Context</b>  | 160      | 25.9% | 310 | 50.2% | 130        | 21.1% | 17      | 2.8% | 617   |
| <b>Interdisciplinarity</b> | 136      | 29.7% | 250 | 54.6% | 55         | 12.0% | 17      | 3.7% | 458   |
| <b>Mechanics</b>           | 164      | 26.4% | 307 | 49.4% | 114        | 18.3% | 37      | 5.9% | 622   |