

#### Assignments Across the Curriculum: A Meta-Analysis 62<sup>nd</sup> Convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication April 9, 2011, Atlanta

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### Canadian context: a primer

- With one or two exceptions, no required first year writing course
- Writing historically taught through the study of literature
- Wide range of writing centres; perhaps the closest point of comparison with US context
- Disciplinary support for writing more common—not across the curriculum but in the discipline







- WAC programs that support faculty members are few and far between
- WAC programs more commonly support students ("How to write a psychology paper" workshops for students)
- Research: writing "inventories" to describe how departments use writing now (baseline data) and to inform discussions of how to expand, direct, or improve the use of writing for learning







- Graves, R., Hyland, T. & B. Samuels (2010). Undergraduate Writing Assignments: An Analysis of Syllabi at One Canadian College. Written Communication 27 (3): 293-317
- This study collected 485 assignments from 179 syllabi at a small liberal arts college in Ontario
- We have continued this work to include six (6) follow-up studies in Alberta:
  - Faculties of Nursing, Pharmacy, and Physical Education and Recreation;
  - Geography and Political Science departments; and a
  - Community Service-Learning program.



### Today's presentation



- Today we will discuss the following five (5) studies:
  - Liberal Arts College;
  - Faculty of Nursing;
  - Geography Department
  - Political Science Department; and
  - Community Service-Learning Program.
- Faculties of Pharmacy and Physical Education and Recreation are in process.





- What range of genres of writing assignments are students asked to write?
- Does this range vary over the 4 year program?
- Do these assignments get longer in the upper years of the programs?
- How frequently do instructors scaffold writing assignments within a course?





- We gathered copies of course outlines and assignments that were given to students
- All assignments and documents were coded by the researchers

✓ course year level	$\checkmark$ source documentation
✓ genre	✓ provision of feedback
✓ word length	✓ method of assessment
<ul> <li>✓ value (percentage of mark)</li> </ul>	✓ audience





### Who isn't assigning writing?



	Number of writing assignments	Percent of courses with writing assignments
Liberal Arts	485	79%
Nursing	157	86%
Political Science	198	100%
Geography	186	77%
Service Learning	163	100%



#### Number of assignments by year in program



	Liberal Arts		Service- Learning	Geography	Nursing
Year 1	34/1.5	7/ <b>1.4</b>	42/10	15/ <b>3.8</b>	17/ <b>3.4</b>
Year 2	225/ <b>2.5</b>	39/ <b>2.3</b>	12/ <b>4</b>	40/ <b>2.2</b>	33/ <b>5.5</b>
Year 3	189/ <b>4.1</b>	40/ <b>2.4</b>	35/ <b>6</b>	24/1.85	50/ <b>4.2</b>
Year 4	56/ <b>3.0</b>	112/ <b>4.2</b>	74/ <b>6.7</b>	107/ <b>3.5</b>	57/ <b>4.4</b>

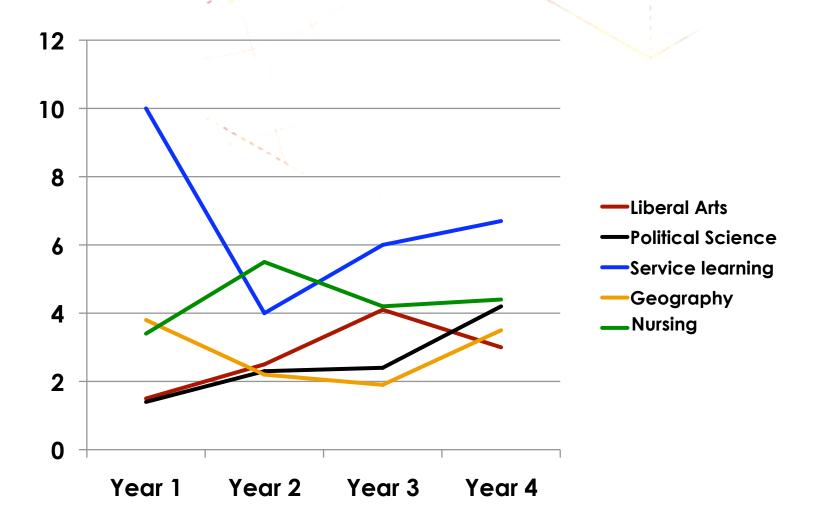
First number is total number of assignments.

Second number is average number of assignments per course.



## Number of assignments by year in program







# Genres vary across the disciplines

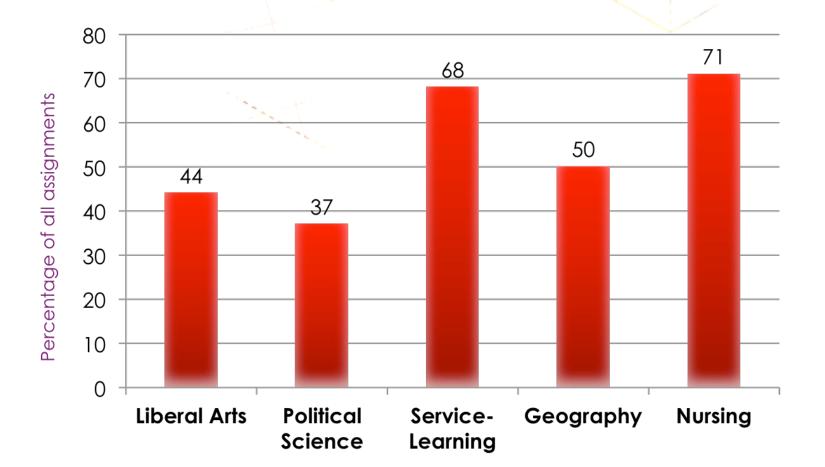


	Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service- Learning	Geography	Nursing
Papers	20	32	22	25	18
Reports	18			30	12
Essay	27	21		12	
Summary					
Self-evaluati	on				24
Handouts					11
Presentation		15	17	13	
Journal			10		8



### Nested writing assignments







## Length of writing assignments



Length in pages	Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service- Learning	Geography	Nursing
under 2	31	5	16	18	0
2 - 4	26	27	39	34	74
5 - 6	12	15	14	19	2
7 - 10	17	23	14	18	18
11 - 12	8	11	6	5	0
13 +	6	19	11	6	6



		Political Science		Geography	Nursing
Instructor or peer	90	92	91	100	99



Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service- Learning	Geography	Nursing
14	21	41	12	96



Liberal Arts	Political Science	Service- Learning	Geography	Nursing
30	25	13	20	60



# WAC, writing assignments, and disciplinary contexts



- Light (2003) noted student engagement correlated to frequency of writing:
  - how we use assignments to engage students is perhaps best answered within specific disciplines.
- Melzer (2009) reported WAC-associated courses contain more writing assignments than non-WAC courses:
  - Would WAC initiatives increase the amount of writing done throughout the university as Melzer observed?
- Our data considers the disciplinary context in Canada:
  - Do we really want CSL students writing more than 10 assignments in 12 weeks?
  - What is the upper limit?
  - Who decides?



### WAC, writing assignments, and disciplinary contexts



- Haswell (1991) argued that student efficacy requires sequential composition over the student's entire college career:
  - How does this happen sequentially over a student's career within a discipline? Without first-year composition?
- Consider how disciplinary programs implicitly or explicitly structure assignments (over the course of the entire program) to maximize student engagement and efficacy
  - For example, we can show the structure of writing assignments in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta



# WAC, writing assignments, and disciplinary contexts



- The writing inventory in our study provides a tool for instructors and administrators to:
  - examine the kinds of writing students are doing across and within the disciplines;
  - evaluate the extent of student writing required in disciplinary curriculum;
  - review curricular goals and outcomes.



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