

## Faculty Use of Writing Assignments: Exploring Classroom Teaching Practices



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## Presentation Outline

- Literature: Benefits of Writing
- NSSE and FSSE Surveys and Topical Module on Writing
- Sample Characteristics and Findings
- Observations and Implications
- Feedback and Discussion



## WHAT DOES THE EXISTING RESEARCH SAY ABOUT WRITING AND LEARNING?



## Literature on Writing

- 3 ways writing currently manifests as institutional initiatives to improve learning:

1. Writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC)
2. Writing-intensive-courses (WIC)
3. Writing-in-the-disciplines (WID)

- It has long been endorsed that student writing positively impacts student learning and development

- Theoretical claims
- Short term studies of student gains



## Literature on Writing (cont.)

- Studies have shown that faculty play an important role in student learning and development (Umbach & Wawrzyski, 2004)
- There are several publications that examine writing as a case study within one department
- However, there has been little study of:
  - faculty's involvement in encouraging good writing practices, and
  - less study of the differences in faculty **involvement and instruction style by academic disciplines and institutional characteristics**



NSSE

## Instruments

### What is NSSE?

- National Survey of Student Engagement
  - Annual spring survey to first-year students and seniors at baccalaureate-granting institutions
  - About 650 institutions participate annually
  - Mostly U.S. and Canadian institutions
  - Assesses exposure to and participation in effective educational practices

**Goal:** To query undergraduates directly about their educational experiences



## NSSE

### What's new in 2013?

- ▶ The survey was updated to preserve what NSSE does well, and to integrate what we have learned over the past decade
- ▶ From “Benchmarks” to “Engagement Indicators”



## FSSE Instruments

### What is FSSE?

- ▶ Faculty Survey of Student Engagement
  - Annual spring survey of faculty members
  - ~150 institutions participate each year
  - Assesses faculty perceptions and encouragement of student engagement

Goal: To provide additional information for the improvement of undergraduate education



## Experiences with Writing Module

- ▶ Explores the relationships between writing and learning, and identifies effective teaching strategies to improve students’ writing abilities, their mastery of course content, and achievement of other important goals of higher education.
- ▶ Touches on three content areas: interactive writing processes, meaning-making writing tasks, and clarity of writing expectations.

## Experiences with Writing Module

NSSE: During the current school year, for how many writing assignments have you done the following?

- Analyzed or evaluated something you read, researched, or observed
- Argued a position using evidence and reasoning
- Gave feedback to a classmate about a draft or outline he or she had written

FSSE: In your selected course section, for how many writing assignments did you encourage or require students to do the following?

- Analyze or evaluate something they read, researched, or observed
- Argue a position using evidence and reasoning
- Give feedback to a classmate about a draft or outline he or she had written

Response Options: All writing assignments, Most writing assignments, Some writing assignments, Few writing assignments, No writing assignments



## PREVIOUS FINDINGS



## Writing & Deep Learning

Results adjusting for student and institutional characteristics and writing amount

	<i>Dependent Variables</i>		
	Higher-Order Learning Activities	Integrative Learning Activities	Reflective Learning Activities
<i>Independent Variables</i>			
Encourage Interactive Writing Processes	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
Assign Meaning-Constructing Writing Tasks	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Explain Writing Expectations Clearly	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓

## Writing & Perceived Gains

Results adjusting for student and institutional characteristics, writing amount, and deep learning

First-Year Students	Dependent Variables		
	General Education	Personal & Social	Practical Competencies
<i>Independent Variables</i>			
Encourage Interactive Writing Processes	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
Assign Meaning-Constructing Writing Tasks		✓✓	✓✓
Explain Writing Expectations Clearly	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓

## Thus...

- The effective writing practices as measured by our three scales had substantial, positive effects on both deep approaches to learning and on perceived gains in learning and development for both first-year students and seniors.
- The positive effects were observed above and beyond any effects associated with:
  - Student characteristics and institutional type
  - Other key forms of engagement, and
  - The *amount* of writing that students were assigned

## Did the Amount of Writing Matter?

The *amount* of assigned writing had no meaningful effects on deep approaches to learning or perceived gains in learning/development

- Coefficients were substantially smaller than the three experiences with writing scales.

## CURRENT STUDY

## Purpose and Research Questions

**Purpose:** To examine how faculty perceptions of writing practices compare with student perceptions.

- How do effective writing practices link to learning and development, and how these practices vary by discipline and institutional type?
- How can faculty development programs use these faculty findings about writing assignments to connect their work across a variety of course, faculty, and institutional characteristics?

## Sample Characteristics

3,500 faculty from 25 institutions

### Gender

- 48% Women

### Race/Ethnicity

- 5% African American/Black
- 4% Asian
- 3% Hispanic
- 74% White
- 14% Other

### Citizenship

- 97% U.S. citizens

### Academic Rank

- 23% Lect/Inst
- 25% Assist, 24% Assoc
- 27% Full Professor

66,333 students from 104 institutions

### Gender

- 63% Women

### Race/Ethnicity

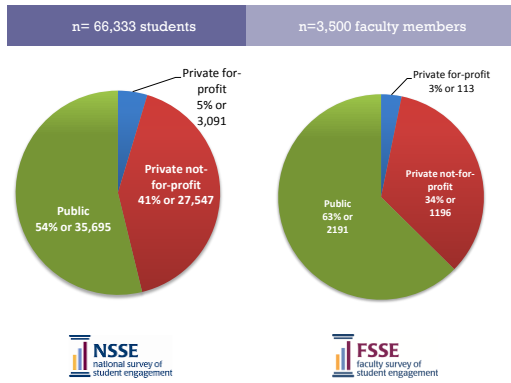
- 9% African American/Black
- 2% Asian
- 10% Hispanic
- 68% White
- 11% Other

### Citizenship

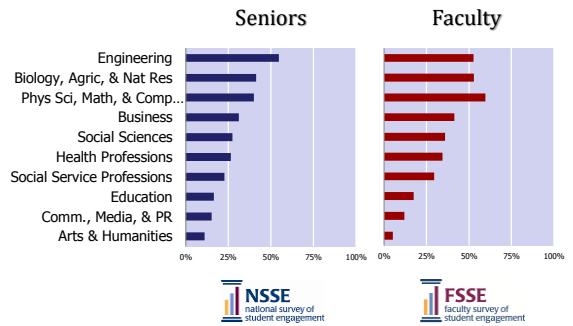
- 95% U.S. citizens

### Academic Year

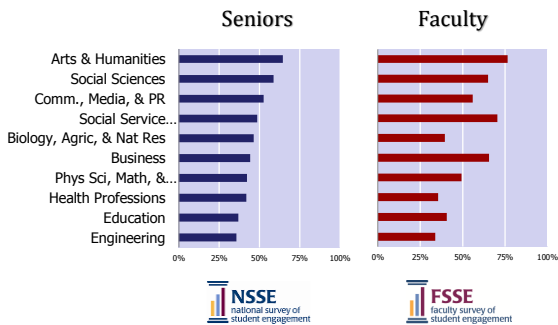
- 41% First-year
- 59% Senior



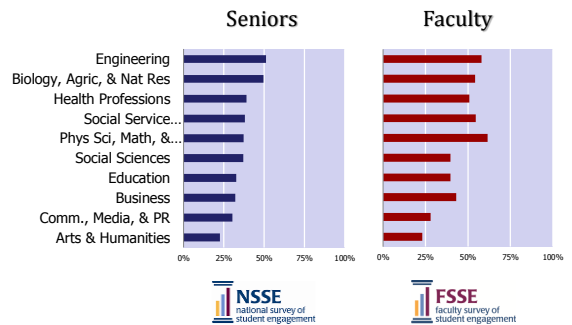
### Explain in Writing the meaning of numerical/statistical data



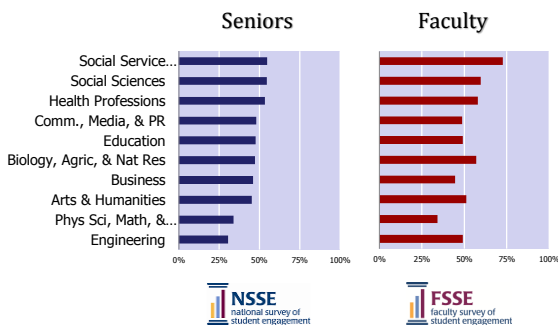
### Argue a position using evidence and reasoning



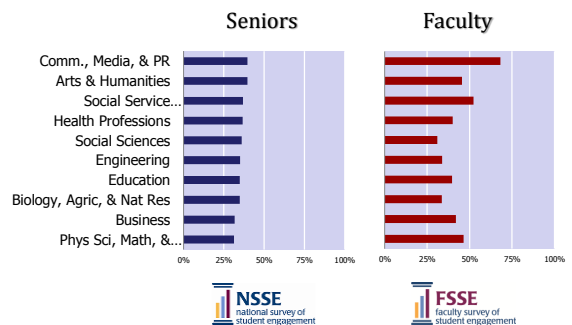
### Describe methods/findings related to data collected in lab, field work, etc.



### Summarize materials they read such as articles, books, etc.



### Address a real or imagined audience (classmates, politicians, non-experts, etc.)



## Observations

- Upper division faculty in communications/media emphasize the use of writing to “address a real or imagined audience” far more than (~70%) other discipline or field
- Seniors majoring communications/media, biology, and education report having the same amount of writing assignments that summarizes materials they have read.
- Faculty in computer science, physical science, and math have more writing assignments that require students to describe methods and findings related to data collected.
  - However, students in those majors do so no more than other majors.



## Suggestions For Faculty Development

- Make the best practices in writing assignments, and the associated instructional practices, a prominent part of faculty and curricular development programs.
- Use data related to writing assignments to monitor progress, benchmark, and motivate faculty by course level, discipline, etc.
- Place emphasis on helping faculty establish better writing assignments and instruction rather than more writing assignments as the institution's primary goal.
- Reconceptualize the place of writing in higher education.



Reference  
**The Contributions of Writing to Learning and Intellectual Development: Results from a Large-Scale National Study**  
 Paul Anderson, Chris Anson, & Robert M. Gonyea  
 (in preparation for the *Journal of Higher Education*)



## Thank You for Joining Our Session



## For a copy of the slides

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